

## **HEALTH SYSTEM, NURSING STAFF**

### *Statement by Minister for Health*

**MR R.C. KUCERA** (Yokine - Minister for Health) [12.25 pm]: As Minister for Health in the Gallop Government I spent 10 days last month visiting Britain and Ireland to review their health services. I was accompanied by the Department of Health's Principal Nursing Adviser, Dr Phillip Della. The focus for the visit was the attraction and retention of nurses, and nursing work force issues generally, the operation of emergency departments and the procedural application of quality and safety measures.

During the past decade the Western Australian health system has undergone a state of almost continuous upheaval and reorganisation. By default, the restoration of confidence in the public health system has had to be one of the major aims of the Government. However, that is, quite simply, no easy task. Since taking on the health portfolio I have never resiled from the gravity of turning around our health system after what can only be described as years of decay. However, that has never been the only challenge. Weighing heavily upon this fundamental problem in this State are all the other challenges that health services face across the world. As I found, health services across the globe face exactly the same challenges as we do in Western Australia.

I am extremely pleased to report that in a very short time frame this visit produced some significant and positive outcomes. In meetings with the Minister of State for Health in Great Britain, Mr John Hutton, and the Irish Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, Mr Brian Lenihan, I discussed a system of nurse exchange between the National Health Service, the Irish Health Service and the Western Australian Government health industry. Nurses, be they from Western Australia, Britain or Ireland, have transferable skills that enable them to travel and successfully attain employment in all corners of the globe. We cannot stop that and nor should we. This is not about looking outside the skills base already in this State, but is about being smart as a Government in harnessing the skills of nurses that come to our shores. We need to be forthright about selling the opportunities to work in the public health sector and that is precisely what we achieved for the first time ever.

It was agreed that together through the National Health Service, the Irish Health System and Western Australia's Department of Health we would develop a memorandum of agreement and proposals for our countries to formally establish a nursing exchange program. Dr Della and I also discussed the establishment of best practice guidelines for international recruitment with the Irish Chief Nursing Officer. The benefits of this approach to recruitment will include the ability to coordinate nursing work force placement and offer a real and immediate alternative to agency work for nurses. The Auditor General's report No 3, August 2002 was tabled today and clearly indicates that the cost of paying outside agencies continues to have a major impact on the Government's health budget. That is why this Government has, for some time, been working on creating its own agency in Western Australia as the National Health Service has done.

I also had the opportunity of viewing the role of nurse practitioners in the emergency departments at St James's Hospital in Dublin and King's College Hospital in London. Nurse practitioners currently see approximately 25 per cent of patients in triage categories four and five. Triage in emergency has consequently been streamlined in a practice well accepted by medical consultants and patients who benefit from reduced waiting times. I therefore welcome the input from key stakeholders in Western Australia on draft nurse practitioner legislation, which will be put out for consultation this week. Of great value to me was observing that a strong proactive triage, bed management system and discharge planning operation mean no ambulance bypass in the United Kingdom.

I believe that this visit to Britain and Ireland was valuable, informative, and productive in finding a pathway through the major pressures in health provision faced in Western Australia. The benefit of the opportunity to see how other countries are tackling and developing answers to problems similar to ours can never be underestimated. I paraphrase the wise words of another: for every complex problem there is a simple solution and it is usually the wrong one. This State's health system will not be turned around overnight but I can confidently say that this visit has indicated that Western Australia is moving in the right direction.