

JOONDALUP HEALTH CAMPUS ISSUES

Grievance

MR A.P. O'GORMAN (Joondalup) [9.31 am]: I grieve to the Minister for Health and I thank him for accepting it. My grievance arises out of a recent survey that I conducted in my electorate. The questions that I asked were specific to my constituents' health experiences in Joondalup. Generally, I found that the responses to the survey were very positive and the vast majority of people who replied expressed the view that the nursing and medical staff at the Joondalup Health Campus in particular were very helpful, and no major complaints came to the fore. I congratulate the staff at the Joondalup Health Campus for their efforts in providing health care in the northern suburbs.

However, a strong complaint in more than 70 per cent of the surveys returned is that it is becoming more difficult to find a doctor who will bulk-bill. I had not asked that question in the survey, but it was frequently mentioned in the space provided for other comments. I telephoned some of the respondents and asked them about their experiences and how they coped with not having easy access to a doctor who bulk-billed. People dealt with it in two ways. First, some people did not go to a doctor and toughed out their illness over a period. Usually they were suffering from a cold, the flu or another illness of a minor nature. Those people took time off work without a doctor's certificate, so employers were not sure whether their employees were actually sick or were just taking a sickie. The employees would go back to work after two days, before they were properly cured and, therefore, would further spread their germs throughout the work force. Secondly, to overcome the shortage of doctors who bulk-bill, some people would visit the emergency department at the Joondalup Health Campus after normal surgery hours had finished, which had the effect of increasing patients' waiting times. As the emergency department is not specifically designed to treat people with minor cold and flu ailments, the delays caused a degree of angst among the patients.

Another issue highlighted in the survey is that Joondalup does not have a Medicare office from which my constituents can claim the costs they had to shell out because they could not find a doctor in the area who bulk-billed. They had to travel all the way to Whitfords City Shopping Centre, where the nearest Medicare office is located. That is not acceptable to a lot of people, particularly the elderly. A number of constituents asked whether it was possible to locate a Medicare office in Joondalup. I will read some of the comments I got back from the survey. One of the questions in the survey asked people what else was important to them and their family about health services in our community. I will read some of the responses I received. I have taken the names off the top of the survey to maintain people's anonymity. One response stated -

The system of Medicare bulk billing at all doctors should be like it was 2-3 years ago when on strict budget visiting a doctor allowed you to get the service you needed.

With regard to whether bulk-billing could be phased back in, one constituent said -

We prefer to go to a Dr who bulk bills but many Drs are starting to charge a surcharge as the Medicare refund is too low.

Another constituent wrote -

Medicare Office. Our nearest one is Whitfords. This needs to be in Joondalup.

Another response stated -

To have every aspect of health covered locally a Medicare office at Joondalup is a much needed facility.

Yet another stated -

We need a Medicare office in Joondalup. What happened to Mal Washer's promise of one?

I do not know whether Mal Washer promised the constituents a Medicare office, but this constituent believes that he did.

Finally, the other major issue highlighted in my health survey was the availability of dental treatment in Joondalup. The closest public dental facilities are located at Warwick. That is quite a distance from the people at Joondalup. A lot of elderly people who live in that area need dental treatment. Many of them cannot understand why Joondalup, which has a fairly well established health system with a lot of facilities, including a hospital and child development clinic, does not have dental treatment facilities. Another complaint was that dental treatment is expensive in Joondalup. I experienced that when I paid a visit to the dentist last week for an examination and cleaning, which cost me \$120. Even though I am a member of a health fund, I got back only \$49. That seems to be a common complaint.

In conclusion, people seem to be extremely happy with the services but they consider that bulk-billing and access to a Medicare office, to enable them to claim their refunds, are high priorities. They also want public dental facilities in Joondalup to complement the excellent facilities it already has.

MR R.C. KUCERA (Yokine - Minister for Health) [9.37 am]: I thank the member for raising this grievance. I also thank him for the way he conducted his survey. It was done in a very positive way that sought a constructive response from the community. I have had an opportunity to talk with the member and read some of the responses to the survey. It highlights two very good things in this State. I also acknowledge the previous Government's efforts in this area. The basic underpinning of the health system in this State is very good, particularly when it is compared with those in other countries. However, I never talk it up because there is always somebody who wants to talk it down for whatever reason. Although the underpinning of the health system is in place, there is no doubt that it is under pressure in certain areas. The supply of family doctors and family services generally is one of those areas. Unfortunately, the State can bring only a limited amount of pressure to bear. In a moment I will talk about how we intend to approach the federal Government. I never miss the chance of saying that the people who work in health care are excellent. In fact, they are the best in the world in many instances. That was recently highlighted to a great degree by the response to recent events.

The Government now has a better working relationship with the Joondalup Health Campus than it had when it originally formed government. The system of provider-purchaser when the Government was simply treating people as a contractor was not working. The relationship that has now developed between the management of the Joondalup Health Campus and the health services is far more sensible than it was previously. Joondalup has gone down the track of implementing the family friendly programs that are now being highlighted in the rest of our organisation, which the member for Murdoch mentioned yesterday. The lack of doctors who bulk-bill is a concern not only in Western Australia but also nationally. That issue is currently on the agenda for the next health ministers conference on 29 November. There has been a rapid reduction in the availability of bulk-billing in this State generally; it has dropped on average by seven per cent.

The situation highlights two things. The first is the ongoing general practitioners' dispute with the Commonwealth about the level of the Medicare rebate. It is hurting families, particularly those on low incomes. Those people who can afford to see a GP generally can, although even that is starting to become a matter of concern. Last week I noted in the minutes of the Stirling City Council that Councillor Spagnolo wanted to put the federal Minister for Health and Ageing on notice that there was no longer an after-hours medical clinic in the City of Stirling - one of the major local government areas in this State. I understand that arose out of a personal experience, when one of the councillor's children was ill. The situation will get worse unless the Commonwealth takes action to resolve the dispute with general practitioners and sorts out the issue of a proper and fundamental remuneration for GPs. This could be by way of extra money to allow for certain support arrangements or co-payments. A range of solutions could come forward. That is something that the federal Government needs to wrestle with. However, I will continue to lobby as hard as possible.

Western Australia has a serious shortage of doctors. A recent Australian Bureau of Statistics report highlighted that WA has the lowest number of GPs per head of population of all the States and Territories except the Northern Territory. The WA figure is eight per cent below the national average. This matter can be addressed only by the Commonwealth Government. One action that the Commonwealth should take is to provide urgent funding for additional places in the medical schools of the universities in Western Australia. I do not have a preference for where those places should be, but we have an urgent need for them. I have suggested strongly that our current medical school could accommodate 60 additional places, and I understand that one university - I think it is the University of Notre Dame - has already requested provision for a 30-place undergraduate school, which would shorten the training that doctors are required to undertake by something like two years. Even with the provision of almost 100 extra places, it will take 60 years to bring the number of doctors up to the levels that we require. That is currently borne out by the fact that 400 overseas-trained doctors practise in this State, some 50 of whom are based in the country.

I recently wrote to the federal Minister for Health and Ageing highlighting the effect of the decline of bulk-billing, especially in the outer metropolitan areas, and the increase in presentations to emergency departments. The member for Joondalup quite rightly pointed out that in Rockingham 78 per cent of presentations to the emergency department are driven by the fact that people cannot find a doctor after hours. It also relates to access to affordable medical services. As I mentioned the other day with Merredin, this State is experiencing a loss of revenue through the Medicare arrangement. Every Australian is entitled to that revenue. I could say more about that, but I need to touch on the location of Medicare offices. The location of Medicare offices is a commonwealth government responsibility. We have spoken to the Commonwealth Government about that, and I intend to write to the federal Minister for Health and Ageing urging her to locate an office in Joondalup. I have no knowledge of the federal member for Moore, Dr Washer, doing anything about it and I will not wait for that. We will do something about the matter and write to the federal minister as a matter of urgency.

Finally, an amount \$100 000 as already been allocated to identify suitable sites for a dental clinic on the Joondalup campus; the planning is under way and we are about to appoint an architect. A new clinic for dental services will be operating at Joondalup by mid-2004. Unfortunately, there will be a little pain in the interim - which is normal with dentists. However, I can assure the member for Joondalup and his constituents that there will be a new dental clinic at Joondalup by 2004.