

COUNTRY HOSPITALS, AGENCY NURSES

525. Mr WALDRON to the Minister for Health:

Given the shortage of resident nurses in country hospitals, and the hospitals' subsequent reliance on the more expensive agency nurses, which adds more than five per cent to the cost of country hospitals not budgeted for by the Department of Health, does the minister have a policy for increasing the number of resident nurses in country hospitals, or will he instruct the Department of Health to budget up front for the use of agency nurses?

Mr KUCERA replied:

I thank the member for the question. It is an appropriate question to raise in terms of country hospitals, because one of the most vexed problems that the Government is currently facing is ensuring there are enough nurses in that area. The first thing we did as a Government was to settle the nurses' pay claim. People are now starting to come back into the industry. Secondly, there is a difficulty with training in rural areas. Principally young women enter nursing courses, but increasingly more men are entering those courses, which is admirable. At the moment, every one of our nursing courses is chock-a-block.

We must ensure that we build a viable work force in each country town. Recently I visited the south west, and I found that there is a fairly solid work force within those towns that does not wish to leave. The Government has tried to ensure that nurses are properly recognised. I intend to put before this Parliament as soon as possible nurse practitioner legislation, which will recognise the real need in the country not only for nurses but also to ensure that they stay there and make a life of it. The Government put into the budget an additional \$300 million for the nursing shortage; not \$104 million, which was put in by the previous Government. We have moved on.

Nobody calls our nurses a sham. They make up one of the groups that hold our community together. They are the fabric of our community and they do some fine work, particularly in the country.

Finally, the issue of training nurses in the country and within country services is a real problem for the Government. Recently I visited Geraldton and I found that the Geraldton Regional Hospital has put in place a very fine training program that allows nurses to bridge the gaps between various levels. That program is linked with the Northern Territory's long distance education program. One of the questions I posed to our local universities was whether they could link into that sort of program and lift the profile of nursing generally. We are totally committed to getting nurses into the country.

Dr Gallop: We funded a new program at the Edith Cowan University in Bunbury to that end.

Mr KUCERA: I thank the Premier for that fact; indeed we did. In fact, I met with the leaders of the nursing program while I was there. We are desperately trying to get nurses into the country. We are determined to ensure that they stay there. We are also determined to ensure they are properly recognised through legislation and funding.