

EMERGENCY DEPARTMENTS, STRATEGIES TO EASE PRESSURE

444. Mr A.P. O'GORMAN to the Minister for Health:

Earlier this year, the Government implemented a number of strategies to ease pressure in public hospital emergency departments during the winter months. Will the minister advise the House how these initiatives have helped emergency departments cope so far?

Mr J.A. McGINTY replied:

I thank the member for Joondalup for the question.

I advise the House that, as a result of the hard work and dedication of our frontline doctors and nurses, our hospital emergency departments are coping well with the pressures they face this winter. However, we are not out of the woods yet - in fact, we are currently facing peak winter emergency demand - and there will still be some days of exceptional demand that will result in the system being put under pressure. I am delighted to inform the House that ambulance diversions at public hospitals this winter are down 80 per cent on last year. Since the beginning of May and until 16 August this year, Perth's major hospitals spent a total of 153 hours on ambulance diversion. Between May and the end of August last year, hospitals spent 906 hours on diversion. In August last year, hospitals spent 257 hours on diversion, around eight hours every day. So far this month, hospitals have been on diversion for a total of just nine and a half hours, including two and a half hours this morning at Royal Perth Hospital. I am also pleased that there have been just three triple diversions since 1 May this year, compared with 50 between May and the end of August last year. That is a very dramatic turnaround.

Several opposition members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order, members!

Mr J.A. McGINTY: In addition to the hard work by the dedicated doctors and nurses to whom I have already referred, the initiatives that have helped us deal with the winter demand in the emergency department have included a \$22 million capital works program to upgrade facilities at our hospital emergency departments; \$20 million to open an extra 338 beds this winter; and \$34.7 million for St John Ambulance to put more ambulances on the road and to employ 100 new staff. Further, a new computer system links the ambulance control room to emergency departments, which helps to reduce diversions. We have opened two general practitioner clinics at Fremantle Hospital and Royal Perth Hospital that, between them, have so far seen more than 1 500 low acuity patients, again taking pressure off the emergency departments. Since we came to office we have also recruited 1 156 more full-time salaried nurses to work in our public hospitals. The winter illness prevention campaign that offered free vaccines to people over 65 years has resulted in 95 per cent of, or 216 000, people taking up the offer. I am delighted to give that report to the House today.

At the same time, we have been pushing very hard to make sure that those people waiting for elective surgery wait the minimal possible period. As at 31 July this year, 12 962 people were waiting for elective surgery at public hospitals. That is the lowest figure since records began to be kept in this State. In July 1999, when members opposite were in government, the comparable figure of people waiting for surgery in this State stood at almost 18 000, a record of which the Opposition should be ashamed. That record figure is substantially the result of an injection in the first six months of this year of an additional \$10 million to provide surgery for more than 3 250 people who had waited too long for their surgery. Although elective surgery waiting lists are at an all-time low, we have to do a lot more in that area. I also report to the House that at the end of the last financial year, the Department of Health initially faced a deficit of \$136 million. As a result of some very good and hard work, it has turned that around to be a balanced budget posting. In a budget of over \$3 billion it has posted a surplus of \$500 000. I congratulate everyone involved in the Department of Health for their good work. It is unusual that some health interest groups and the Opposition seem to be advocating more ambulance bypass in Western Australia. From the Government's point of view, it is determined to achieve much less.