

MAJOR TEACHING HOSPITALS, LIMIT ON NUMBER OF NEW PATIENTS

780. Mr T.K. WALDRON to the Minister for Health:

Before I ask my question I would like to say on behalf of all National Party members how shocked and devastated we are by yesterday's tragic road crash which took the life of Brenda Adams, our leader Max Trenorden's much loved partner of many years. Brenda was greatly loved by all and gave fantastic support to Max, his family and electorate office and the National Party. Our thoughts are with Max and his and Brenda's families at this tragic time. I sincerely thank today's speakers for their kind and thoughtful words. I thank everyone here today for their kind thoughts and for the great support they have offered. We have been overwhelmed by the many well wishes that have been sent from across the State and the political spectrum in support of Max. On Max's behalf, I thank you all very much.

- (1) Has the minister placed a limit on the number of new patients that may be admitted each day, other than through the emergency department, to the State's three major teaching hospitals?
- (2) What is the limit for each of those hospitals?
- (3) What is the justification for imposing a limit as opposed to increasing the number of beds to meet the demand?

Mr R.C. KUCERA replied:

- (1)-(3) We are increasing the number of beds; some 122 beds will open for the winter peak. I am pleased that the member for Wagin has asked this question, because the one thing that Governments cannot do - no matter which party is in power - is deal with the number of people who come to the front door of public hospitals. The only way we can keep people out of hospitals is by increasing the capacity of general practice and family doctors. At the end of the day, public hospitals cannot shut their doors and the increasing number of people who come to emergency departments is enormous. I am not aware of a specific cap having been placed on any of our major teaching hospitals. However, I know that during the winter period, it is a difficult juggle, almost on an hourly basis, to ensure that we deal with elective and emergency surgery at the same time. Last Monday week there was a degree of publicity when it was stated that people were being treated in ambulances outside Royal Perth Hospital. On that day - this is a classic example because Mondays are particularly busy days at our major hospitals - there were 157 attendances at Royal Perth Hospital and nobody was turned away. On no occasion was the door shut in anyone's face. Yes, people had to wait; and, yes the paramedics assisted, but, at the end of the day, nobody was turned away. Of the 157 people who attended Royal Perth Hospital that day, 46 came in by ambulance. A total of 98 patients were admitted to the hospital and 63 people came in by way of emergency; the remainder came in for elective surgery. The hospitals have to plan for that pressure almost on a daily basis. The impact that GP arrangements and the breakdown of bulk-billing is having on this State is quite concerning. Let me give the House an example. The number of GP services available in this State has fallen by 2.2 per cent in the past five years.

Mr C.J. Barnett: It is your job to fix that.

Mr R.C. KUCERA: The Leader of the Opposition must listen to this because it is important to his constituents. The GP bulk-billing rates fell seven per cent from 78.4 per cent in 1997-98 to 71.9 per cent in 2002. GP numbers have not grown and there is an estimated shortage of 300 GPs. Our emergency department attendances have grown by 9.5 per cent during the past five years. Joondalup hospital has had an increase of 17.5 per cent. At Armadale-Kelmscott Memorial Hospital the attendances at the new emergency department have almost doubled. The general population is growing by only six per cent. Regardless of what we are saying here, the hospitals are coping well. However, they were never set up and designed to act as de facto doctors' surgeries and aged care homes. It is as simple as that. The hospitals are doing a magnificent job of coping with the peaks. Another 120 beds will be opened during the winter period. To get the extra 428-odd nurses into the hospitals has been a real boon for us. I am more than happy to say that the nurses themselves are experiencing the benefits in some of the pressure that has come off them and in the way that they are now able to work within the hospital system.

I would love to be able to take everybody straight in the door and deal with the issues immediately. However, the fundamental thing, which I will keep repeating, is that the door is never closed in anyone's face. Everyone is taken in and is dealt with properly and professionally. We will continue to build the hospitals and to improve the system in this State until we get it to a stage that we are comfortable with.