

CORONAVIRUS — REGIONAL AIR SERVICES

230. Ms M.J. DAVIES to the Minister for Health:

I refer to reports that Qantas has shifted to a limited schedule for intrastate flights this week, leaving regional centres such as Karratha with only one flight a week and patients stranded in Perth following medical treatment or unable to travel to Perth to access essential treatment.

- (1) What arrangements are in place for these people while the federal and state governments negotiate an outcome to maintain an appropriate minimum flight schedule for regional centres serviced by Qantas and Virgin Australia?
- (2) Will the government underwrite additional accommodation costs for patients stranded in Perth and who are unable to return home?
- (3) What processes are being developed to ensure that regional people requiring essential but not emergency medical treatment such as chemotherapy can continue their treatment?

Mr R.H. COOK replied:

- (1)–(3) I thank the member for the question; it is an important one, and one that is occupying a lot of the work of the State Health Incident Coordination Centre and other arms of government at the moment to see whether we can remedy the situation. We are very concerned that we have a number of patients in regional areas who want to return to Perth—the member mentioned the issue around chemotherapy, which is a classic case because we want them to be able to continue their treatment—or who came to Perth for treatment but are now isolated because of the cancellation of scheduled flights. In particular, the Virgin announcement essentially provided us with 24 hours’ notice, and has severed a lot of transport corridors for people in Western Australia.

The state is working with the commonwealth, in particular with the Deputy Prime Minister via the work that the Minister for Transport is doing with him and his office, to try to secure minimal services for the regional towns that were being serviced. We are looking at a strategy that uses a combination of services offered by the Royal Flying Doctor Service; regular passenger transport services; services used for fly in, fly out workers in the mining sector; charter flights; or other charter services that we can use across government. The government also has a number of assets that it is looking to engage for specific requirements.

This is a tough task, and I am not pretending that it is a good situation. It has very much come out of the blue and we now have to scramble to make sure we remedy the situation. We are obviously looking to the Australian government to make sure that it is in a position to underwrite some of the expenses of the airlines, so that we at least have a skeleton schedule of flights to regional Western Australia. At this stage, we are waiting for the outcome of those discussions. In the meantime, SHICC is aiming to try to meet the health needs of regional Western Australians. We are happy to assist those in Perth who require accommodation, through a combination of hotels, Ronald McDonald House or the lodges that the Cancer Council WA runs, and we are obviously doing whatever we can to support those people. We are particularly keen to make sure we get these things done quickly because we know that continuity of treatment is an important part of getting on the pathway to wellbeing for many people.