

CORONAVIRUS — HEALTH SYSTEM RESPONSE

194. Ms J.J. SHAW to the Minister for Health:

Can the minister update the house on the response to COVID-19 by Western Australia's health services and the action that continues to be taken to manage the impacts of this virus?

Mr R.H. COOK replied:

I thank the member for the question. This is a good opportunity to update the house on a range of activities that are taking place across the health system. Just this morning we came from a briefing of all Western Australian federal members of Parliament, who joined us both in person and online to be provided with details about what we are doing around the COVID-19 response. All those members of Parliament from both sides of the political fence appreciated the information that was made available.

One of the things we said to them is that it is inevitable that we will soon have community-based spread of the virus. In some respect, we will then be in a position to move towards our treatment phase of the response as we transition out of the containment and isolation phase. It will be an important step when our health services start face-to-face engagement, if you like, with many of the presenting patients. We are doing a lot of work around ensuring that the workforce is supported so that it can deal with this issue. Members will have heard me talk about the need to boost our workforce through work pools. Online today we set up a dedicated call centre that has been developed for all WA health staff to manage COVID-19 screening and testing in line with the set criteria. If it is required after the initial screening, those staff will be referred to the COVID clinics. WA health staff working in other regional areas will be able to access COVID testing through their local hospitals and health services. This is all part of an important process to make sure that those people who work on the frontline have our back.

As we get ready to leave Parliament this week, I present everyone with some homework. As members go back to their electorate offices, they should take the opportunity to look up the doctors and nurses and those people who work in the hospital environment. Members need to let them know that they support them and thank them for their dedication. They are going to be in the fight of our lives over the coming months. It is important that they know that every one of us is behind them in terms of this fight. It will be a tough one. We know that we have some of the best doctors, nurses, allied health staff and support workers in the world who can support us in this fight.

We have also announced that we will be extending our free influenza jabs for school-age children. Many members will be aware that Western Australia was the first government in Australia to offer a free flu vaccine for children from six months to five years of age. It is an important first step that other states have since followed. Today, we have announced that we are extending those free flu jabs—try saying that after a hard day at the office—for all school-age children from five to 11 years of age. This is a really important step. We know that kids are pretty resilient and, by and large, will be able to cope with the colds and flus that come each year. However, we also know that they are the best transmitters of influenza and therefore it is really important that we target them. Modelling suggests that if we can increase the vaccination rate of school-aged children to 20 per cent, we will reduce the number of hospitalisations from influenza by 30 per cent across all age groups. That is because these little mites pass it on to their parents, grandparents and others in the community. This is an important next step. We will make sure that we roll out the influenza program at speed. Many members will remember that last year we lost 79 Western Australians to the flu virus. This year we have an even bigger threat, and that is the overlay of COVID-19. We must do even more to make sure we can suppress the amount of influenza in the community because it impacts on the elderly and the most vulnerable.

In other news that members may not be familiar with yet, as a result of a meeting with the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee today, the commonwealth Deputy Chief Health Officer has announced restrictions around medication supplies. I provide this information not because it is our doing but because many members have said that they are concerned about members of the public buying medications for long periods, and that certainly has been a concern that the pharmacy industry has expressed to us. From today, the dispensing of certain drugs will be limited to one month's supply, which members will appreciate is a perfectly reasonable amount of time, or one unit per purchase. There will also be controls on over-the-counter medication such as ventolin and other medications used by people with a lung condition. They will be placed below the counter—not below the counter; that is for other stuff! They will now be placed behind the counter and customers will have to demonstrate, via various forms of documentation from their doctor, that they require those medications so that we can continue to provide those sorts of drugs to the people who most need it.

This is a fast-moving situation. We know there will be changes. That is inevitable. The Prime Minister has made further announcements today and I know that the Premier will meet with the national cabinet tomorrow, so we can expect further announcements to come out of that meeting. I stress to members that we will soon be experiencing the beginnings of the community-based transmission of the virus. We are ready for it and we will have measures in place to make sure we can take the Western Australian community through that next phase.

