

HOSPITALS, AGENCY NURSES

21. Mr M.F. BOARD to the Minister for Health:

I refer the minister to the Auditor General's report on nursing shortages released yesterday which expressed concern at the excessive use and cost of agency nurses.

- (1) Does the minister agree with the Auditor General that the greater use of agency nurses has been undertaken without adequate financial evaluation and raises concerns about the quality of patient care?
- (2) What steps has the minister taken to implement the promise he made during estimates committee hearings in May this year that he would phase out agency nursing in this State by early next year?
- (3) In which hospitals has the minister determined that agency nurses will be phased out?

Mr R.C. KUCERA replied:

I thank the member for Murdoch for the question. I also thank the Auditor General for a very informative and sensibly put together report on nursing generally.

- (1) Yes, of course I am concerned about the use of agency nurses. I am also very concerned that the previous Government assisted in privatising nursing in this State. That has been an absolute disaster. The summary on the first page of the report is quite telling. It states -

The period of this examination, October 2001 to March 2002, coincided with the Department of Health initiating a range of fundamental reforms affecting the issues examined. Therefore, this report provides a broad assessment of the management of nursing shortages in the period to March 2002 and a benchmark on which to evaluate the reforms.

- (2)-(3) I have already drawn the attention of members to the period of examination in the Auditor General's report. I have also referred to the summary because it is important. The Auditor General clearly acknowledges in his report the concerns raised within the period of his examination. He is quite right to acknowledge those concerns.

I am thankful that the Auditor General has now set a benchmark for measuring these kinds of programs, which did not exist before. As I said during yesterday's debate, before we can start to address the basic underlying problems, there must be fundamental structural reform so that we can have one unified health system in this State.

I also put on the record that we have reformed the overall structure of the system to make it coordinated and unified. We have established a nursing issues management group to collect work force information, develop a generic agency contract and work towards the coordinated recruitment and attraction of nurses. We have negotiated a 13.5 per cent pay increase for registered nurses, midwives and enrolled nurses, together with a range of improved conditions and better career paths. We have created new nursing positions as a result of a review of workloads. We have allocated \$16.4 million for the nurse-link recruitment program, for which we have already received more than 300 expressions of interest. We have immediately funded 400 new nursing positions to ensure that the people who take up those positions will be funded and can be taken into the system. We funded \$500 000 worth of scholarships for undergraduate and postgraduate students in the previous year's budget, and that has been increased to \$600 000 in this year's budget. We are well advanced on the implementation of the "New Vision, New Direction" report into nursing, which highlighted the need for improved flexibility. We have commenced work on establishing an internal government staff pool. We have expanded the role of nurse practitioners. I am pleased that the member for Murdoch has said that the Opposition will support that legislation when it comes before the House later this year. In an unprecedented step, this week I wrote to every one of the 25 000 registered nurses in Western Australia informing them that we want and need them in the public system. The Government values its nurses. Yesterday evening I spoke to the doctors and nurses at Royal Perth Hospital, who are doing a magnificent job under difficult conditions. I thank them for doing that. Our record stands for itself. When we came to government -

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members! Interjections across the Chamber prevent the minister from continuing his answer.

Mr R.C. KUCERA: When we came to government we inherited a great deal of mistrust from nurses. We went through a properly planned, methodical system in which we settled what the Australian Nursing Federation acknowledges was one of the best deals nurses in this State have ever received - some \$300 million. That was the first fundamental step. We have put that on the record. We value our nurses in this State. We will value them into the future and we will build a great system.

