

Royal Flying Doctor Service — Adjournment Debate

HON MIA DAVIES (Agricultural) [10.31 pm]: I rise this evening to speak about the expanded Royal Flying Doctor Service fleet of planes. The RFDS holds a special place in the hearts of many country members and, I hope, of every member in this house. Most people will know someone who has used the service. I certainly do. In fact I was reminded when I was doing a bit of research on this that the day Hon Brendon Grylls and Hon Kim Hames flew to Kalgoorlie to announce some additional funding for the Royal Flying Doctor Service, news filtered through to Hon Brendon Grylls that his grandmother had unfortunately needed to use the RFDS. She is well and healthy now, but when he was out announcing funding, the RFDS was flying out to Corrigin to pick her up and bring her to Perth. It was an interesting day, to say the least.

I had the good fortune of attending the blessing of the new fleet of planes at Jandakot headquarters on Sunday, where I saw one of the new planes. There was only one in the hanger because the other two had been put into service that morning. There had been an unfortunate shooting incident at Norseman and a gentleman in Coolgardie had been involved in a road-train accident. They were out working very hard. The chairman of the RFDS Eastern Operations commented that, despite 250 people being in the hangar to celebrate the blessing, it would not be unusual if everyone had to pick up their chairs and move them out of the way so that the new plane could be towed out and put into use, because that is how busy they are.

The Liberal-National government is contributing more than \$171 million over five years to the RFDS; \$68.5 million came as an additional commitment from the state government in December last year, of which \$28.9 million was provided from royalties for regions. I hope every member of this house meets representatives from the RFDS to ensure they have a thorough understanding of this vital service. The funding for the RFDS will ensure that everyone has access to good quality health care no matter where they live. This is in stark contrast to the previous state government. I refer to an editorial in the *Countryman* on 4 December 2008 that states —

With a budget surplus of nearly \$2 billion expected for the 2008-09 financial year, the previous Labor government could only manage a measly \$38 million over five years.

The new Liberal-National Government has recognised the importance of this service and has put funding into it that warrants the recognition of this valuable service. The funding has gone into the purchase of four new aeromedical Pilatus PC-12 aircraft, which will make a great difference to the people who either work, live or visit rural and remote Western Australia. We should not forget that many of the people who use this service are tourists, particularly in the north west. People visit Broome and the far-flung parts of our state. Unfortunately, our hospitals cannot cope with some of the traumas that occur in the remote areas.

Two of the planes will replace existing aged aircraft and two will be new additions. That takes the total number of aircraft to 14. The new planes can accommodate two patients on stretchers and the medical crew, comprising a doctor and nurse. I was fortunate enough to have a guided tour of one of the new planes. They are indeed wonderful pieces of equipment. One of the new planes enables babies to be transferred in humidicribs. I am told that the first 20 minute to three hours is incredibly important to get a patient suffering from a trauma or illness to one of the teaching hospitals in Perth. One of the new benefits that the planes bring is that patients can be appropriately looked after on the new planes.

The RFDS funding also caters for three additional crew members, which is incredibly important. There is no point having these wonderful planes if we do not have the staff to jump on board. More staff have been employed in Port Hedland and Jandakot, and Kalgoorlie is in line for an increase in 2011.

This funding was very much needed. I learned that the demand for the Royal Flying Doctor Service services is up by more than 17 per cent over the past five years. That is an incredible number. As an example of the vital work the RFDS does, it is interesting to look at some of the statistics. The chairman of RFDS Western Operations, Tony Crook, gave some interesting statistics on Sunday and I jotted them down on a piece of paper while I was there. In 2007-08 the RFDS transported 1 616 sick and injured people from around the state, it received 35 394 calls for medical advice and assistance, and conducted 1 852 medical clinics at remote sites. It is important to note that last point because the RFDS is not just a patient transport service. It provides wonderful preventive health clinics around the state. Other interesting statistics include that in 2007-08 the RFDS Western Operations aircraft flew more than 5 578 165 kilometres, with more than 16 000 hours in the sky. That is quite an effort for a group that, unfortunately, the Labor government and the former Minister for Health, Mr Jim McGinty, were prepared to dismiss as just another special interest group. It is an exceptional service and it is definitely in a class of its own.

This funding, which is essential and long overdue, does not address all the challenges that the RFDS continues to face. Its workload will undoubtedly continue to increase on the back of the population growth that we have heard

about over the past couple of weeks and months after the announcement of the Gorgon project. In July and August we have seen record numbers of patients transported and record distances flown. The RFDS also faces challenges that we might not consider, such as an increasing number of obese patients. I was saddened to learn that sometimes patients are too big to be managed in the traditional way and they require special equipment to be transported, which is incredibly expensive. We must put our minds to that and make sure that everyone has access to quality health care. The RFDS is dealing with more mental health transfers. Mental health patients require special care and attention. Often police officers are required to be involved in the transfer, which means that they are not in their community doing their job.

I was heartened to hear that a new contract with the federal government provides additional funding for primary emergency evacuations and primary health care, so the federal government has also come to the party, and I know that there is also support from the Western Australian corporate sector. There were close to 250 people in the hangar on Sunday and a lot of them put their hands in their pockets as part of the Flying 1000 crew that is trying to fit out these planes with the required equipment. I was also heartened by the comment from the RFDS chairman, Tony Crook, speaking during the blessing. He said, "I can say with confidence that RFDS is better equipped today than it ever has been in the past to be able to deliver essential health services to people in the bush." I found that incredibly heartening, as part of a team that has delivered funding into this critical service. I am glad that royalties for regions funding can contribute to this service, and I hope that it continues to provide that essential link for people who live and work in, and visit country Western Australia.