

SWAN DISTRICT HOSPITAL, TEMPORARY CLOSURE OF THE EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT

Statement by Minister for Health

MR KUCERA (Yokine - Minister for Health) [2.14 pm]: The temporary closure of the emergency department at Swan District Hospital is unacceptable to the Government and the community. Although many challenges confront health, I assure the people of the Swan district that the resolution of this issue is the Government's top priority. I remind people that the reduction of services at Swan District Hospital is not a funding issue, but an issue of staffing, safety and flexibility. The emergency department was closed after hours at the insistence of doctors at the hospital. It would reopen tomorrow if we could find the senior staff required to run the emergency department safely. The Government is currently looking at a number of options to rectify the situation. These include the establishment of a general practice service at the hospital to provide a primary care model of service. This would not, in any way, be a substitute for an emergency service at the hospital, but would be a complementary service. Other options include the short-term employment of a locum service to operate until permanent staff are found, or the rapid appointment of specialists in emergency medicine to make up for the staffing shortfall at Swan District Hospital.

The situation at Swan District Hospital has exposed major flaws in the health system. It has exposed the fact that no framework is in place to prevent this type of situation occurring; that work practices in our health system are inflexible and restrictive; and that while \$2 billion is poured into health each year, the level of accountability in the system is poor compared with other areas of public expenditure. As the Minister for Health, I am unable to temporarily transfer senior medical staff from one hospital to cover the gap at Swan District Hospital. There are 1 400 doctors working in the public health system in Western Australia, yet as minister, I am unable to direct any of them to support Swan District Hospital when it needs help most. As a condition of employment, senior doctors must agree to work in different locations other than the hospital to which they are contracted. To paraphrase a leading commentator last week: that is not a system; that is a dictatorship. People have a right to expect emergency services to be available from their local hospital.

At my request, a working group has looked at the whole issue of emergency services and bed management for some months. This group has included representation from emergency department specialists, including Dr David Mountain. I had expected that this would be an ideal group to advise the best way to ensure an appropriate distribution of resources. This would enable the public health system to provide metropolitan-wide coverage of emergency services. I am still awaiting advice from the people who are responsible for this aspect of the public health system. As a result, I am now considering an external review of all emergency services across the metropolitan area. I will provide details on that at a later date. Under the reforms outlined by the Health Administrative Review Committee, there will be better coordination of services across the metropolitan area. An option would be for staff to be employed by area health services, rather than individual hospitals.

This Government has inherited a system that has had a patch-up job done on it for eight years. That will not happen any longer! We are in the process of delivering fundamental change. It may deliver some short-term pain, but the ultimate gain will be a better health system for all Western Australians.