

**MERREDIN DISTRICT HOSPITAL, MEDICAL STAFF AND RESOURCES**

*Grievance*

**MR B.J. GRYLLS** (Merredin) [9.42 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Health and it relates to the doctor situation in Merredin. I and the members of the community, many of whom are in the gallery today - I thank them for the distance they have travelled to attend Parliament today for this most important debate - they have been astounded to hear the comments of the Minister for Health, in both this House and the media, that he bears no responsibility for ensuring that a state government hospital is adequately supported by a doctor. It is the minister's responsibility to ensure that the basic requirements of health service delivery are in place. Only he has the ability to appropriately direct funds from the budget. He has tried to make it the federal Government's responsibility, he has tried to make it the Australian Medical Association's responsibility and he has tried to make it my responsibility. He has even tried to blame the Shire of Merredin. However, he is the Minister for Health and it is his responsibility to ensure that the Merredin District Hospital is equipped with medical staff and resources.

I have taken the minister's advice given on Tuesday to contact my local federal member, Wilson Tuckey. My queries simply confirmed what I already knew to be correct: it is not the federal Government's responsibility to provide a doctor to work in the state government hospital; it is the minister's. The federal Government has supplied the State Government with \$650 million under the commonwealth-state health agreement. Under that agreement the State has a responsibility to resource the health system. Even if I lobbied for more funds, it would still be up to the Minister for Health how this money would be spent. I am willing, however, to agree with the minister that there are federal issues relating to the provision of health care and Medicare provider numbers. There is an inflexibility in the system that should allow a salaried doctor to perform private work and claim the Medicare rebate. There are issues relating to the AMA's recruitment of overseas-trained doctors. I commit to work with the Minister for Health to lobby the federal Government to make changes in this area. I have already written to the federal health minister to make her aware of the grave situation in Merredin.

Merredin needs three doctors to service the town and surrounding districts. If the minister took the responsibility of supplying a doctor to work at the hospital, the AMA could continue to provide a doctor to work in private practice. A new doctor is starting in Merredin this week, which is excellent, and the Cunderdin general practitioner also is willing to work part time in Merredin. That would ensure a supply of doctors. The ability to establish a roster system is essential. It is of little use supplying one doctor as the workload and pressure is simply too much and the system will fail. As well as responding to the current crisis, steps must be taken to ensure that this problem does not keep recurring. However, the provision of one salaried doctor would provide continuity of medical care in this community, and that is the minister's responsibility.

I advise the minister to visit Merredin and talk to the people who live in that town without a doctor. This is not about political point scoring or the National Party versus the Government; this is about the people sitting in the gallery and the rest of our community who must live in a town that has a failing health system. The minister needs to give an undertaking that he will take responsibility for and rectify this problem, and provide certainty of care. The people he can see in the gallery today are so concerned with the current situation in Merredin and surrounding districts that they have undertaken a seven-hour round trip to Parliament to hear the health minister's solution to their problem. Their concerns are justified, because at the end of the day they are likely to return to a town that has no chance of securing the doctors needed to adequately service the district's population. If the minister is not interested in listening to me, I hope he is willing to listen to them.

In the gallery today are representatives from my electorate, including the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Shire of Merredin, the Merredin health forum president, the CEOs from Westonia, Bruce Rock, Trayning, Kellerberrin, Corrigin, Wyalkatchem, Kondinin and Mt Marshall - I apologise to anyone I may have missed - as well as concerned community members. They are here to ensure access to an adequately staffed hub hospital which, under the minister's new plan, can offer a health service with a doctor 24 hours a day, seven days a week. These communities recognise the need for cooperation and that is why they are here today. For the majority of the time in the past two weeks they have had no access to a doctor. Emergencies have had to bypass Merredin and travel 100 kilometres to Cunderdin, where the hospital and Dr Gray are under great stress. Last weekend Dr Gray serviced the Merredin hospital by telephone. This situation is a disgrace, and one that all Western Australians would find unacceptable. Thanks to the minister's willingness to shirk responsibility for the situation, it is one that could lead to tragedy.

There has been no lack of financial contribution from local government in trying to attract doctors to and retain them in our community. Country people pay more than once for the provision of their health service. Part of this contribution is through their shire rates, which are used to help attract doctors to many rural communities. For example, the Shire of Merredin supplies a house and a car, it is building a new medical centre and it

subsidises losses by the AMA. Since 1997 the shire has spent more than \$1 million in capital and operating costs associated with attracting a doctor to and retaining doctors in the town.

The minister should strip away the politics and the rhetoric; we have a crisis. In his pre-election commitment to the people of Western Australia in the October 2000 edition of "On The Beat with Bob Kucera", when referring to the previous Government, he said -

We all know health services are very expensive to provide, and this Government worries more about money than people.

Today the minister stands accused of the very issue he campaigned against - putting money before people. The people sitting in the gallery today represent their community. Let them go home with a solution to this most serious issue. In recognition of the effort that these people have made to travel to Parliament today to hear this debate, I hope that directly afterwards the minister will be able to find 10 or so minutes to meet with them directly and discuss this issue. If his diary does not allow for that, I hope he can schedule a meeting in Merredin as soon as possible to meet with these people who have shown extreme interest in this concerning situation to try to find a solution to this problem which is at crisis point.

**MR R.C. KUCERA** (Yokine - Minister for Health) [9.50 am]: I welcome the member for Merredin's offer to work with the Government on this issue. However, the member should first get his rhetoric right and start to understand what the real situation is. The federal member for O'Connor, Mr Tuckey, has also made comments this week that are totally out of order. I notice that in this morning's *The West Australian*, Mr Tuckey's comments have been corrected by the federal Minister for Health and Ageing, who has made it clear that attracting doctors to the bush is a federal responsibility and has conceded that it is a big problem.

Mr M.W. Trenorden: You are the one who runs the state budget!

Mr R.C. KUCERA: The problem of funding rural doctors is well known. It is easy for people to think that the best answer to the problem is for the State Government to take on the whole delivery of health services in this State and walk away from those areas that are the responsibility of the federal Government. However, that simply cannot work. Mr Tuckey has tried to suggest that the Commonwealth Government funds the State to provide general practitioner services through the Australian Health Care Agreement. Nothing could be further from the truth. As I said yesterday in this House, for over 100 years, private practice - that is, private doctors who build a continuity of practice with a community - has been the way in which health services have been delivered in this State. Yes, the State has a responsibility to supply services to public hospitals, but we do that by contracting the doctors who are employed by the federal Government, through the Medicare Agreement, in each town. For the past few years the Shire of Merredin has been contracting doctors to work in the town, and the State, quite rightly, as we do in every country town, has been contracting the services of those doctors to supply about 30 per cent of the doctor services that are provided by the hospital; the other services that are supplied by the hospital, such as nurses, are already in place. It is no wonder everyone is getting confused when this sort of rhetoric is being put without any attempt to try to understand what is happening. For the past two years, the Shire of Merredin has been contracting with the Australian Medical Association to supply doctors for the town of Merredin and the shire. Western Australia currently has in excess of 400 overseas-trained doctors. That is a clear indication of the desperate shortage of doctors across the country generally. There has been no change for many years in the number of training places for doctors in this State. I acknowledge the good people from Merredin who have come to the Parliament today. It is of equal concern to me as it is to them that they are having difficulty in getting doctor services in their town. However, I ask the member for Merredin to drive down Stirling Highway and count the number of doctors surgeries between the university and Fremantle. He will then understand what I mean when I say that there is a total maldistribution of doctors in this country. Each doctor in this country is given a Medicare provider number. However, that has no geographic basis to it at all.

I move on now to how doctor services are supplied. The Shire of Merredin well knows how much money it puts in to provide cars, housing and infrastructure for private practice doctors. The doctor from Cunderdin is trying to start a private practice in Merredin. However, as soon as we put state-funded salaried doctors into a hospital, that immediately stops any private practice in that town, because the private practice is no longer viable.

Mr M.W. Trenorden interjected.

Mr R.C. KUCERA: If the Leader of the National Party were to listen to the rest of the debate, he would hear the solutions that we have been proposing to the Commonwealth Government, and he and the member for Merredin would then be able to work quite comfortably with the Government to achieve these solutions for not just Merredin but for the entire State of Western Australia. The doctors in Merredin achieve about 70 per cent of their income from the Medicare Agreement and about 30 per cent from the services provided through the hospital, which last year amounted to about \$189 000. However, as soon as we put salaried doctors into a town, that 70 per cent of funding is precluded, because we no longer get that funding from the federal Government; it

is lost forever and there is no other top-up from the federal Government. Therefore, that again is another imposition on the state health system.

I am not kicking the ball around or passing the buck. The member for Merredin has said that I was blaming the shire. All I did yesterday, as the member for Merredin would know if he were being truthful with the people of Merredin, was read out the article in the *Merredin-Wheatbelt Mercury*. If the member were to give the people of Merredin a copy of the *Hansard*, they would see that I was not blaming the shire. All I was doing was pointing out the enormous complexity of the problem. The member for Merredin, together with the people from the shire, should read this article, because they know full well what the complexities in the shire are. Two days ago, after the federal member for O'Connor had put this nonsense in the newspaper and had tried to wash his hands and the federal Government's hands of this matter, I wrote to the federal Government and offered it a solution.

Mr P.D. Omodei: You should resign!

Mr R.C. KUCERA: I notice the member for Warren-Blackwood is being noisy! It must be Thursday and he wants to go home early!

The solution that I have offered across this State, not just in Merredin, is that if the federal Government wishes to cash out the Medicare payments to the State, we will be more than happy to take on the responsibility for the supply of general practitioner services in hospitals. I will be more than happy to pick up the \$300 000 or \$400 000 of federal funding to which the people of Merredin are entitled. However, if the State were to take on that responsibility without getting that sort of assurance, we would miss out on that money and the money would have to come from somewhere else. I am more than happy to work with the member for Merredin and to talk to the federal member for O'Connor to make the federal Government face up to its responsibilities. I am not passing the buck. That proposition has already been put. We are already working with the Australian Medical Association. I understand that the AMA will be placing an extra doctor in Merredin in the next few days, and I thank the AMA for its efforts, because it is losing money now. Merredin can easily have a viable private practice if people like the member for Merredin and the federal member for O'Connor, and the federal Government, are willing to work with us.