

INDIGENOUS HEALTH — CLOSING THE GAP AGREEMENT

278. Mr P. ABETZ to the Minister for Health:

Does the government plan to continue its funding for the Closing the Gap program for Aboriginal health services, given the success of the program and the positive health outcomes that have been achieved for Aboriginal people in Western Australia by this program?

Mrs M.H. Roberts: The fact is that the shadow minister put a motion on notice on this subject yesterday.

The SPEAKER: Member for Midland, I call you to order for the first time. If anybody wants the standing orders changed by which anybody can answer any questions, write a letter to me! When a question is asked of a minister, I expect the minister to answer the question.

Dr K.D. HAMES replied:

I am quite happy to answer the excellent question without preamble—just by rearranging the wording!

This is a very important issue and, contrary to the views of the member for Midland, this question was not initiated by the notice of motion by the shadow minister. No criticism of the shadow minister for doing that, because until I was able to make any statement by getting finance approved, I was not in a position to give comfort to those people involved in providing the Closing the Gap service. There are over 300 full-time equivalents involved—317 jobs altogether—that provide services through Closing the Gap. Until that funding had been confirmed, I was not in a position to make any statement on it.

Now I am pleased to say that the funding for one year of that program has been confirmed. It is \$31 million, which is what we asked for for that first year to be able to continue the existing program. We are strongly committed to the concept of Closing the Gap. Members may be aware that this program was initiated as part of a Council of Australian Governments agreement between the commonwealth and the states in which we independently provided additional funds to try to close the significant gap in life expectancy for Aboriginal people across Australia and, of course, in this state. It has been a highly successful program, with the government being able to put considerable extra services into those communities. However, at this stage we cannot say how well the program has done to actually close the gap because that is a much longer process of assessing how the program should go and how it should proceed. There has been some work done. The commonwealth government has commissioned the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to do a national evaluation of the national partnership agreement on Closing the Gap.

There have been further conversations between the state government and the commonwealth about committing to a further agreement. That has not been developed yet. We have had correspondence from Hon Warren Snowdon about that and we are currently in discussions, but there is nothing on the table as yet about that agreement. However, we will put forward this funding, and during this year we will do an assessment of the key performance indicators and the outcomes—and not just on this project. I fund a large number of other projects that fund health initiatives to assist Indigenous communities, and so do a lot of other government departments. There is a fair lack of coordination and understanding of what all these different departments, and the commonwealth, do. During that year, we will do a much better assessment. In my view it will perhaps in the future allow some of those funds that have come through other sources to be able to be focused more through this source, because it has been such a successful program and one of the best with which we have been involved. I am very happy to say that the funding is there.

I have committed to employing those staff for a further three months until we get through the budget process. Those people involved in this work deserve certainty and by committing today to that funding, it provides certainty for all of those 317 staff, a large percentage of whom are Indigenous, for the future of this program.