

NURSE SHORTAGE

Statement by Minister for Health

MR R.C. KUCERA (Yokine - Minister for Health) [2.10 pm]: Addressing the shortage of nurses is a priority for the Gallop Government. To demonstrate this, as a first step we committed \$69 million in April last year to employ 400 new nurses over four years. This commitment was made because, on coming to Government in February last year, we found it abundantly clear that the pressure on the existing nursing work force had reached crisis point. In fact, in less than a decade, the equivalent of one in nine nurses had left the Western Australian public health system. The value placed on the nursing work force had all but diminished, with the use of agency nursing staff becoming common practice. What was once a unique matrix of vibrant hospital communities across the system had taken what can only be described as a battering.

On the back of the Government's commitment, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission handed down the Nurses (WA Government Health Services) Exceptional Matters Order 2001 on 11 February this year. Clause 6.1 of this order states -

The respondent employers shall, from no later than 1 April 2002, implement in the allocation and rostering of nurses a developed form of the staffing model described as the "nursing hours per patient day model" . . .

This order is a landmark. It is the first of its kind in this country that provides a genuine framework to address nursing workloads. The decision has a life of two years, in which time the Government as an employer in the health system is to work towards meeting the principles of the Industrial Relations Commission's order. It is not trite to say that this cannot be done overnight. That is the truth. We have always known that, which is why this Government has taken a workable approach. That approach is a long-term - over the term of this Government - and comprehensive nursing strategy to retain and attract nursing staff. We simply need more nurses working as permanent employees in our health system to achieve the principles of the Industrial Relations Commission's order. If there are more public hospital nurses, there will be a reduction in the current unacceptable and unsustainable \$26 million annual reliance on agency staff. If more nurses are working as permanent employees, there will be a level playing field across the labour force on the wards, which will mean a real opportunity to create a working environment in which staff are where they want to be.

Our nursing numbers are by no means where they ultimately need to be. That is precisely why we have committed \$16.4 million to recruitment and are set to embark on a major television and print media campaign. However, without a shadow of a doubt, we are well on our way. The Department of Health has complied with the Industrial Relations Commission's order in a number of respects. The department has been able to more accurately assess how many more nursing full-time equivalents are needed. Consequently, an upward revision has been made from the Government's commitment prior to receiving the order of 400 to a figure of 450. As a result, an additional \$4.5 million has now been allocated, bringing the total amount committed for new nurses over four years to \$73.5 million. In addition, the Department of Health has responded to the Industrial Relations Commission's order by assessing every health site across the system, notifying health services of additional resources to implement the order, establishing area nursing workload consultative process committees, commencing management education, producing information kits for distribution to staff, and making available two comprehensive progress reports.

Over the past year we have worked towards relieving the pressure on our existing work force by increasing the number of nursing FTEs across the system by 325. That is a clear demonstration that a great deal of work has been done to date. Having said that, we know we still have a long journey to turn health around in this State. However, we also know that more working nurses simply mean a better health system for this State.