

AGENCY NURSES, REDUCTION IN PUBLIC HOSPITALS

**528. Ms J.A. RADISICH to the Minister for Health:**

There has been a suggestion in recent media reports that the use of agency nurses in public hospitals has been dramatically reduced in the past couple of weeks, resulting in the closure of beds. Can the minister advise the House whether this is actually the case and, in doing so, indicate the impact of the second phase of the nurse recruitment campaign?

**Mr R.C. KUCERA replied:**

I thank the member for Swan Hills for the question. I also thank her for her support of nursing, which obviously has grown out of her own difficulties in the past year, and we wish her a speedy return to health.

Suggestions have been raised in recent media reports. They emanate from only one source to the media and I will not go into that issue. The reality is that since the first day we came to office, and since I took on the role of minister, the Government's principal priority, particularly in its first two years in office, has been the renewal and the redevelopment of the nursing profession in this State. I am very pleased to say that that is now starting to occur. We are developing a comprehensive strategy to rebuild nursing right across the board. Part of that has involved the reduction in the usage of agency nurses right across the health system. Certainly, at no time has that been done at the expense of, nor does it in any way relate to, patient care. Our total policy is to support patient care absolutely and there will always be a role for agency nursing within the hospital system, but in a specialist way. The real difficulty is that in the seemingly headlong rush into privatisation that occurred in the eight years prior to our Government coming into power, the encouragement for agencies to supply nurses - at a much inflated wage rate - reached the stage at which something had to be done. I will make some major announcements later this year about how we intend to again move into the next phase of the nursing profession in this State and how we will ensure that the nurses in this State are properly employed and supported.

Since we started the nursing campaign, we have received 2 778 expressions of interest from people who wish to re-enter the nursing profession, support themselves in nursing and ensure that they can advance to the next level. I am sure that when the nurse practitioner legislation eventually gets through the upper House, we will see yet another phase in the development of nurses.

This year we have increased the number of full-time equivalents in the nursing profession in this State by almost 400; that is permanent nurses who have come back into the system. On top of that, an unprecedented total of 2 339 students applied for tertiary nursing studies this academic year, up from just 1 600 in the previous year. Rather than continually knocking the efforts made by the Government in this State, I say to my opposition spokesperson that it is time he came out of the closet and spoke to his colleagues in the federal education system about the issue of FTE numbers and the higher education contribution scheme places in universities and supported the young men and women whom we desperately need in the system. I am advised that there has been no increase in the number of places for nurses for many years. Only a little over 600 places were allotted to us this year for nurses, despite the fact that we received well over 2 000 applications. Unfortunately, some of our brightest and best missed out. I would be more than happy for the member for Murdoch to write to his parliamentary colleagues in Canberra and realise for once that the true issue for State Parliaments is supporting their States.