

SHORTAGE OF NURSES, PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM

619. Mr BOWLER to the Minister for Health:

Will the minister inform the House what the Government has done to address the shortage of nurses in our public health system? Specifically, has the Government investigated the reasons for the shortage; and, if so, developed strategies to entice existing nurses back into the public health system and encourage students to enter nursing as a profession?

Mr KUCERA replied:

I thank the member for Eyre for his question. This question from the member is timely, because I know the problems of enticing and retaining nurses in the goldfields area. I am pleased to answer the question because it reflects the announcement of the New Vision, New Direction report that was completed by Judge Antoinette Kennedy and a fine group of people, and released last weekend. On this occasion, I also compliment the member for Darling Range for the work he did when he was Minister for Health. He should be applauded for establishing the steering committee in October 2000.

The study was conducted with wide consultation with the nursing and midwifery profession. Some 958 nurses took part in individual interviews in the program. The study was conducted for the purpose of producing a professional strategic framework. Some specific issues were identified in the report. Among a number of professional and educational issues, some key issues need to be addressed in the challenges that currently face the nursing and midwifery work force. I will refer to those. The work environment needs to be family friendly, and work stress must be addressed. There is no doubt that certain parts of our nursing profession are under extreme stress and extreme pressure at the moment. Staffing, including the staff mix and the utilisation of the work force, must be managed effectively and reflect the future needs of nurses and midwives to ensure the delivery of quality care. The professional development of nurses and midwives must be enhanced by career links, preceptors, training within the workplace and, more importantly, clear and defined career pathways.

Finally, I am pleased to announce that this year there has been a marked increase in the number of school leavers choosing nursing as a career option. For the academic year 2002, there has been a 20 per cent increase in first preferences for nursing. Due to the funding of refresher and re-registration courses, 180 nurses - that is, both registered nurses and enrolled nurses - have re-entered the government health industry. I commend that report.