

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING — FUNDING

594. Mr M. McGOWAN to the Premier:

I have a supplementary question. The Premier often says that. Will he provide an answer to the question by the close of business today?

Mr C.J. BARNETT replied:

My record on answering questions is pretty damn good. Neither education nor vocational training is within my portfolio. I do not have an answer readily available, but I undertake to get one.

PUBLIC DENTAL SERVICES

595. Mr I.M. BRITZA to the Minister for Health:

I note that there is a public dental program for affordable dental care for people on low incomes. Can the minister advise the house what the government is doing to improve dental services for people on low incomes?

Dr K.D. HAMES replied:

I certainly can! I thank the member for the question. It was interesting that he was telling me before we started question time that his son has just had care under the school dental program. He said that it was very good and very successful. I am pleased to hear that.

There are two components of the dental treatment that is provided by the state government. The adult program covers people with Health Care Cards and pensioner concessions. They are eligible for subsidised general or emergency dental care. That program assists about 80 000 people a year, which is pretty good. We either employ dentists directly—there is a cohort that do that—or go to the private sector and contract out specific services for specific patients. We also have the school dental scheme, which entitles all schoolchildren to free dental care. Each year 245 000 students are involved in the school dental service. A team of professionals visit schools. There are 41 mobile school dental therapy vans in Western Australia that travel the length and breadth of the state to give children dental care. We have had trouble with the wait times for adults. Indeed, it has been difficult getting dentists because they do not earn anywhere near as much doing that work as they do in the private sector. It has been difficult to attract and retain dentists and their assistants to do that work. Over the last year, the team that works in the dental service has worked exceptionally hard and has been able to reduce the waitlist from 23 months, which everyone would say is totally unacceptable, to just seven months. That is a twofold reduction in the time people are waiting for dental services. Hon Kevin Minson, who was a member of this house, is part of that dental team. He and the rest of the group put in a lot of effort to make sure that the waiting times came down. I congratulate them for it.