

DAKAS STREET MEDICAL CENTRE, BROOME — CLOSURE

Statement

HON SHELLEY ARCHER (Mining and Pastoral) [10.04 pm]: As members would have heard during today's questions without notice, I was recently advised that Dakas Street Medical Centre in Broome is likely to close within the next couple of weeks, just as Broome is heading into its busy tourist season. This medical centre is a purpose-built facility that employs four doctors, three nurses, a practice manager, two receptionists and a bookkeeper. There are nine consulting rooms in the centre, of which five are used by the medical practice, one by PathWest, two by an injury management and audio centre and one by a psychologist. It also has a pharmacy attached to it.

The centre was established more than six years ago and since then has struggled on a daily basis to remain viable. After losing hundreds of thousands of dollars, the owners have now decided to revisit their investment and consider alternative options for the future of the business. In looking for alternatives, the owners have written to federal, state and local governments seeking assistance and advice to keep the medical service available to the community. However, responses from governments indicate a view that the facility, due to the fact that it is privately owned, should just close. There has been no tangible dialogue or support from any level of government.

The Dakas Street practice manager was recently reported in the *Broome Advertiser* of 15 May 2008 as saying —

“Patient care will be jeopardised because they won't have access to regular health care and there will be huge waiting lists for doctors as well,” . . .

I am astonished at the government's responses, and in particular the response of the state Minister for Health, Hon Jim McGinty, who, in his response to the director of the Dakas Street Medical Centre, replied in two sentences. On such an important issue as the future of quality health services in the Kimberley, I would have expected a lot more than, “Thank you for your letter but we are not in a position to purchase or lease your facility.” With the burgeoning tourism trade, the pastoral industry and the growing Indigenous population, and with the medical skills shortages across the Kimberley, the government's response is appalling.

The Department for Planning and Infrastructure projections for the region's population indicate an average growth rate of 2.7 per cent per annum from 2006 to 2021. In Broome alone, there has been a 47 per cent increase in population over the past 10 years. We also have report after report indicating that the declining health in Indigenous communities is one of the most urgent issues that need to be addressed if we are to arrest the high incidence of intergenerational poverty in the Kimberley. Here we have a near new facility in danger of closing, with eight medical professionals in jeopardy of losing their jobs and moving out of the Kimberley, and all the minister can say is, “I acknowledge your letter but we can't help.”

It might be the case, as stated in the answer to my question without notice today, that “The provision of general practice services is a commonwealth government responsibility”. Is that not a little like passing the buck? Is it not like saying, “It is not my problem, so somebody else had better fix it up. It is not the state's problem, so the commonwealth government has to fix it up”? When we go to the commonwealth government, it says that it is not its problem; it is somebody else's. Therefore, no-one takes responsibility for the problem.

What will the minister do when there is a complete overload of the services at Broome District Hospital due to the fact that this medical facility, which is integral to Broome, has closed down? Where will all the clients who now use this facility go? Broome hospital, of course. Yes, there are other private practices in Broome, but they are also overburdened with clients, and I doubt that they would be able to pick up very many new clients from this medical service. I am astounded that the current Minister for Health can state so arrogantly that all will be all right. It will not be, and those of us who live in the town know all too well that everything will not be all right.

The minister states in the answer that I received today that Broome health services will continue to allocate resources to meet the priority needs of the community. This community struggles already on a daily basis to get anything out of this government to meet its hospital and medical needs. A classic example of this is a young bloke who came to my office. He has a mental health condition and needed a prescription for his medication. He could not get it. Why not? He is on a disability pension and the private practice does not bulk-bill, and the hospital explained that it does not do prescriptions. Therefore, the bloke did not get a prescription. He is schizophrenic. He did a few naughty things around Broome and ended up in prison, and round and round the circle goes.

Hon Robyn McSweeney: The good news is that he will get his medicine in prison!

Hon SHELLEY ARCHER: That is right.

The next part of the answer is even more astounding. It states, “Should the private practice close, it is expected that the majority of patients will continue to access services from the other private general practices in the town.” That answer shows just how out of touch this minister is with the problems that people in rural and regional areas are facing in attempting to get an appointment with a doctor, whether that be in a private practice, the hospital or even the Aboriginal medical services that are available in some towns in the north of this state. All these providers provide a fantastic service under extremely difficult circumstances, and I commend them for that. However, we cannot expect them to now pick up all the clients who will be left without a medical provider if Dakas Street Medical Centre closes. I wanted to say that I am speechless. I guess after that speech I cannot really say that. However, I can say that I am astounded that this state government—or even the commonwealth government—cannot find some way of providing some assistance to Broome to enable this private practice to remain open. The closure of this private practice will have a huge impact on the medical services that are currently provided in Broome. It will certainly have a huge impact on the hospital, because all the former clients of that practice will end up at Broome District Hospital seeking an appointment with a doctor, which they will not be able to get.