

HOSPITAL EMERGENCY DEPARTMENTS

100. Mr P.D. OMODEI to the Minister for Health:

I refer the minister to the crisis situation that exists in emergency departments in our major hospitals.

- (1) Is the minister aware that patients attending emergency departments at Royal Perth Hospital and Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital are being put at risk because of the critical overcrowding that continues to occur?
- (2) Is the minister aware that in some cases mental health patients are “stored” in emergency departments for up to four or five days and often have to be excessively sedated and restrained until they can be transferred to appropriate mental health facilities?
- (3) Will the minister indicate precisely how many beds will be provided in the coming winter period to end the crisis facing emergency departments in our major hospitals?

Mr J.A. McGINTY replied:

I begin by paying tribute to the doctors and nurses who staff our emergency departments for the tremendous job they do. The state government appreciates its responsibility by making sure it provides doctors and nurses with the resources that are necessary for them to do the tremendous job they do under enormous pressure. By definition, emergency departments operate under pressure; they operate with the worst traumas that occur in the state, and that is the nature of the work in emergency departments. The government appreciated that there was a growing problem in emergency departments a number of years ago, and set in train strategies to deal with the additional demand that is placed upon emergency departments and staff during the winter period from approximately May to October each year. In each of the most recent years we have opened additional beds, we have negotiated a new contract with St John Ambulance to increase the efficiency of ambulance services, and we have developed a number of other initiatives to enable people to stay away from the emergency departments. I am thinking particularly of people from nursing homes who would come to an emergency department when they could be adequately treated in situ. Tens of millions of dollars have also been spent upgrading the emergency departments. The most recent example of that was the dramatically expanded emergency department at the Royal Perth Hospital. We have plans on the drawing board now to double the capacity of the Peel hospital emergency department and to double the capacity of the Joondalup hospital.

Mr P.D. Omodei: What about those mental health patients?

Mr J.A. McGINTY: I am coming to that. We have appreciated that the nature of the pressure requires a government response and support; and, most importantly, in each of those years we have opened more beds to keep pace with the increased level of demand. What we are proposing - I could have provided more details if the member had given me some notice of this question - is to open an additional 220 beds in the public hospital system over the next few months to cope with that extra demand that is occurring. That is based upon the best advice we have of the number of beds required to avoid excessive bed block during the coming months. There will always be days when, for whatever reason, more people get sick or injured than is budgeted for or is the average. Those days will also present challenges. One of the systemic problems, particularly at the Royal Perth emergency department, occurs on Mondays. I asked why that was the case. It was simply the case that doctors were not rostered on in sufficient numbers to be able to discharge people who were ready to go home on Sundays, so there was an influx of patients and a build-up of patients already in beds. We have authorised and funded the employment of more doctors on Sundays to discharge patients so that more beds are available for emergency patients on Mondays.

I will now refer specifically to mental health patients. I do not mean this as a broad generalisation at all, but some mental health patients in emergency departments can be highly disruptive. We have begun construction of specific holding beds dedicated to mental health patients in each of the major emergency departments. The Royal Perth facility is due for completion at the end of June, so it will be ready for the peak demand period. At the Fremantle Hospital and the Joondalup hospital the location of those facilities has been identified and construction is under way at the moment. At each of those hospitals, five beds and appropriate mental health nurses and additional psychiatrists will be available to take those people to an area in which they can be treated separately from the mainstream of trauma admissions to emergency departments. That is a new initiative designed to take the pressure off as far as mental health patients are concerned. In answer to the Deputy Leader of the Opposition's specific questions -

- (1) No, I do not concede that there is a crisis with patients being put at risk at the moment. In fact, our emergency departments, under pressure, are operating superbly.

- (2)-(3) I have explained the initiatives we are undertaking regarding mental health patients and I am confident that, with all the pressures that the coming winter will bring to bear, the emergency departments will provide an adequate, if not excellent, service to the people of Western Australia.