

NURSE-TO-PATIENT RATIOS

581. Ms L.L. BAKER to the Minister for Health:

Before I ask my question, the member for Swan Hills has asked me to welcome the student leaders from Arbor Grove Primary School.

I refer to the McGowan Labor government's investment in our health system and the significant increases in the number of nurses in our hospitals. Can the minister update the house on our government's historic and unprecedented offer to introduce nurse-to-patient ratios and midwife-to-patient ratios in WA public hospitals?

Ms A. SANDERSON replied:

As outlined in the previous answer, we are currently bargaining with the Australian Nursing Federation. For the last 20 years, the ANF has been campaigning around nurse-to-patient ratios. We previously had nursing hours per patient day, which was introduced some time ago. That has been a good mechanism, but over time it has worn thin and reform around how we staff our hospitals is required. We have listened to our midwives and nurses, and have come to the table with an offer to implement ratios. When we look at where that has been done in other state's health systems—namely, Victoria and Queensland—we see that it has taken two to three years to implement the ratio reform, because it is significant. The Western Australian health system is like no other health system in the world. We provide care in regional and remote vulnerable communities as well as the metropolitan area, so we have to make sure that any policy and any system will work best for patients. My priority is patient care and the patients in our system.

The new offer also includes the revised wages policy, which includes a \$3 000 cost-of-living payment. For a first-year nurse, that wage offer equates to a nine per cent pay rise over two years. We acknowledge the hard work of our nurses and midwives, the challenges faced by COVID, the changing of policy and sometimes the tough conditions, particularly around wearing PPE. That is why we are working and negotiating with them with a good wages offer to improve their working conditions. We want to make sure that we put in place targets that care. We are also recruiting. There has been a 12 per cent increase in the nursing workforce in just over 12 months. The claims that no-one will come and work in the Western Australian health system are just not true. We have had a 12 per cent increase in an already large workforce. This agreement will cover 18 500 employees. Again, there has been a 12 per cent increase. No other area of the public sector is growing like the health sector. We are absolutely committed to that and to ensuring that we have the best possible working conditions and health system for our nurses to practice in.

Unfortunately, the offer was rejected by the ANF without it putting it to its members. Despite the fact that the ANF has made numerous comments through the media, including that the pay demand of 10 per cent was "maybe not realistic, but it is a starting point", the ANF has also clearly stated that it would like a working party to get together to sort out how ratios would look, and that is exactly what we have offered. The ANF has also stated that it does not need a fully formed policy, but a principle and then it can work with it. That is exactly what we have delivered. What I say to the ANF and to nurses in Western Australia is that we are genuine in our offer in seeking to improve their working conditions. Come back to the table and let us get that \$3 000 in their pocket before Christmas.