

SEVERE ACUTE RESPIRATORY SYNDROME, STATE RESPONSE

594. Mr M.P. MURRAY to the Minister for Health:

Can the minister advise members how the State is responding to the threat of severe acute respiratory syndrome?

Mr R.C. KUCERA replied:

I thank the member for Collie for his question. He has shown concern, in part because of his knowledge of China, where it seems that SARS originated. We have cleared the member for Collie.

This is an important question. It needs to be stated clearly that the Department of Health has been liaising daily with the Commonwealth and with other States and Territories to coordinate the Australian response to the SARS outbreak. In fact, I met with other state health ministers on Friday in Sydney and discussed the issues. Department of Health staff are now positioned at Perth International Airport to screen passengers with symptoms that are identified on incoming flights. As members know, measures are being taken on the flights themselves to ensure the threat is covered. Health care workers have been provided with guidelines for the management of suspected cases. Workers include those at public and private hospitals, general practitioners, and ambulance and Royal Flying Doctor Service personnel. A national SARS hotline - 1800 004 599 - has been established by the commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing to provide information to the public. I took the liberty this morning of asking the staff of my office if they would communicate those details to all members of Parliament so that members might advise their constituents. To date 16 persons have been investigated for SARS in Western Australia, one of whom is currently in hospital but is not considered to have SARS. Western Australia is well prepared to manage a case of SARS; measures are in place to prevent it spreading in Western Australian hospitals and the community. Contrary to some silly remarks by an individual in the Press at the weekend, Western Australian hospitals do have sufficient supplies of masks to manage suspected SARS cases, and WA distributors expect additional masks to arrive here in the weeks ahead. This disease is a serious global issue. I am very pleased to be able to say that this State's Department of Health triggered the initial response to this outbreak as a result of World Health Organisation concerns that were addressed by the director general. I am very pleased to say that we support the response of the commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing.