

PUBLIC DENTAL CARE, WAITING LIST

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

Mr Speaker -

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order! I call to order the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the National Party.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Will the minister outline what strategies the Government is implementing to reduce the waiting list for public dental care?

Mr J.A. McGINTY replied:

I am very pleased to advise the House that this morning at the Morley Dental Clinic I met with a number of patients who have been waiting in my view for too long for dental treatment through the public system. We have announced the injection of \$2.3 million to provide dental treatment to an additional 6 500 patients who are on the waiting list for dental treatment. This will be used to provide dental care through both government dental clinics and private dentists.

Mr J.H.D. Day: Is that new money?

Mr J.A. McGINTY: Yes.

Mr J.H.D. Day: Is that new money in addition to the health budget?

Mr J.A. McGINTY: Yes. How many times do I need to say yes before the member will understand?

In January of this year 24 000 people were waiting for dental treatment. That is an appallingly high number of people. As a result of the initiative that was announced by the Premier earlier in the year, today that number has been reduced to 18 505. That is a pleasing result, but the number is still far too high. The projection is that in June of next year that figure will be reduced to 12 500. This money is designed to expressly achieve that result. There can be no doubt that the cause of the blow-out in the dental waiting list was the decision by John Howard, the Prime Minister of Australia, in 1996 to scrap the commonwealth dental scheme. That has meant that tens of thousands of mainly elderly, low-income Australians, particularly in Western Australia, have been denied access to good quality dental care. It has unfortunately fallen on the State to reverse that trend. I am very pleased that Mark Latham, as part of the federal election campaign, has promised -

Several members interjected.

Mr J.A. McGINTY: Unlike John Howard, who does not care for the fate of the mainly elderly, low-income people from whom he took away dental care, Mark Latham has promised \$300 million over four years to reinstate the commonwealth dental scheme. Members opposite will not do it because they do not care. That is the problem. Western Australia's share of that money will be about \$10 million a year. That will be sufficient to treat about 30 000 Western Australians each year. It will have a profound effect on dental care in Western Australia. For the tens of thousands of Western Australians who rely on the public system, Mark Latham's promise will do away with the waiting list in Western Australia for public dental care. From that point of view it is an excellent policy. In addition, we have managed to recruit country dentists, while making a real inroad into the number of people in rural Western Australia who are waiting for dental treatment. Kalgoorlie, Newman, Bunbury, Albany, Port Hedland and the Kimberley will all benefit, or have already benefited, from the appointment of additional country dentists. I also accept that the level of salaries paid to public sector dentists needs to be reviewed. I have asked for a report so that we can act on what needs to be done to attract more dentists into the public dental system. The waiting list is too long. The cause is well understood. We are acting to fix that. For those mainly, elderly low-income people who rely on the system, we will deliver for them.