

CORONAVIRUS — ELECTIVE SURGERY — REINSTATEMENT

310. Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE to the Minister for Health:

I refer to Western Australia's response to COVID-19 and its great success in containing the spread of the virus. Can the minister outline to the house how this success has allowed the government to start increasing the number of elective surgeries across the state and can the minister advise the house what will need to happen to reinstate all elective surgeries in WA's public and private hospitals?

Mr R.H. COOK replied:

I thank the member for the question. It is an important one for the future of health care in Western Australia because although we know that making sure we keep the number of cases of COVID-19 down, we also need to be aware of the disease burden and the burden of chronic disease and injury in other aspects of our health care. On 23 March, we made a difficult decision—that was to cancel all elective surgery other than category 1 to make sure we had sufficient capacity in our hospital system to respond to what was at that point an anticipated demand for hospital services associated with COVID-19. The other event that was occurring at the time was the huge demand for personal protective equipment, for not only our healthcare workers but also healthcare workers across the globe. We were really struggling, as were all healthcare systems, to make sure that we had enough equipment to protect our workers and the patients they care for.

Rolling forward, our suppression strategies in Western Australia, as part of the national cabinet process, have been very successful. On 28 April, I was delighted to join the Premier in announcing that we would not only continue to do category 1 surgery but also start a quarter of the category 2 surgical activity from that date. That has been going well. We are continuing to undertake a range of category 1 and 2 elective surgeries, focusing particularly on those people who have waited the longest. Recently, the Premier and I were very pleased to announce that from 18 May—yesterday—we would once again increase the amount of elective surgery that is taking place in Western Australia. We will now do category 1, 2 and 3 elective surgery. We are not only focusing on the category 1 surgeries, which are the most important, but also making sure that we get to category 2 and 3 surgeries, particularly for those who have waited longer than most.

On behalf of the government, I thank all Western Australians for their patience during this time. Many people have been waiting for pain-relieving surgery. The decision to suspend that surgical activity was not an easy one, but it was a necessary one. We will continue to grow the amount of elective surgery that is taking place. As I said, from yesterday, it is ramping up to 50 per cent. We will continue to monitor the amount of elective surgery that is taking place against the amount of personal protective equipment we have available to us. We are continuing to source that equipment from overseas. We are also continuing to source it locally from those manufacturers that have been able to repurpose their manufacturing processes to support our health system. Elective surgery is also taking place in private hospitals, which means that more Western Australians will be able to get their surgery.

I ask all Western Australians to be not only patient, but also ready. We are trying to reschedule this surgery at apace now, so some people will not get a great deal of prior notice of their operations. We ask them to be ready, particularly if their surgery was cancelled before because they will be the priority, to make sure that we can get it going. It is not just cafes that people are desperate to get back into; our surgeons, nursing staff and patients are also keen to get back into operating theatres. We have had a rush on. I think we will meet that 50 per cent target faster than we would perhaps be comfortable with, but it is great to see people getting back on board. We will continue to review the situation and, hopefully, get up to 75 per cent and then 100 per cent of activity. We want to get people back into our hospitals because we know that we can then get them on a better care pathway and back on the road to recovery. This is a great opportunity. It is an opportunity that has been brought about by the hard work of Western Australians to get the COVID-19 disease burden under control. If we can continue to do that through social distancing, personal hygiene and the measures that we have in place, we will be able to do more of these things, which will get Western Australians and our hospitals back to work. This is a great opportunity to continue to care for Western Australians, and it has been made available because we are getting the COVID-19 pandemic crisis under control.