

ELECTIVE SURGERY — WAITLISTS

**234. Ms L. METTAM to the Premier:**

I refer to the Premier's comments when in opposition when the elective surgery waitlist was under 20 000 patients stating —

No Western Australian should be left seriously ill, waiting for their pain-relieving surgery or waiting months and months for their first appointment.

With elective surgery waitlists skyrocketing to over 30 000 patients, and patients such as Shelley French waiting over three years for an appointment, how on earth can Western Australians have confidence in this government when, under the Premier's watch, significantly more people are being left seriously ill, waiting for pain-relieving surgery or waiting months and months for their first appointment?

**Mr R.H. COOK replied:**

I thank the member for the question. I remember those days of opposition when we used to talk about the failures of the Barnett government in relation to its health policies. Let me talk about some of those policies. Between July 2015 and July 2016, when I was in opposition—dark days indeed—the number of nurses employed by the Barnett government actually reduced by 645. As part of those dark days, between July 2015 and July 2016, the number of midwives reduced by 60. Also in these dark days, between September 2015 and July 2016, the number of doctors reduced by over 130. Dark days indeed. Between July 2015 and January 2017, the number of paediatricians actually reduced by 17. The reason we critiqued the Barnett government in the manner that we did was that everything it was doing was the antithesis of what you would expect a government to do if it took the waiting list seriously. We saw how those waiting lists grew and outpatients waited longer.

Let us roll forward some years in this post-COVID period when we know that the health system is under significant pressure. Despite that significant pressure, since coming to government in 2017, the annual health budget is up 33 per cent—one-third of when we came into government. There are an additional 4 000 nurses, an additional 1 600 doctors and the health workforce has grown by nearly 30 per cent. That is compared with WA's population growth of just nine per cent over the same period. Under my government, we spend more per capita on health care in WA than spent in any other state—in fact, 15 per cent above the national average.

We have an incredible Minister for Health in Western Australia who is doing so much to fight back against this post-COVID period. Ambulance ramping is down 21 per cent in 2023 compared with 2022, down 44 per cent in December 2023 alone compared with December 2022; and, of course, we see a range of measures taking place, part informed by the sustainable health review, but part simply because of the great leadership that the Minister for Health is providing. Our virtual emergency department, our State Health Operations Centre and our patient transport coordination hub. Our health system is the best in the country because of the policies and investment that we have put into our health system.

That is not to say that it is perfect. We know that particularly people who are waitlisted as a category 3 elective surgery patient can wait some time. As their situation deteriorates and if the pain continues to grow and they have concerns about their ongoing care, they should go back to their general practitioner to make sure their GP can then provide further information to the waitlist controllers to make sure that person can be moved up the list or their category can be reassessed so that they can get their operation sooner. Of course, we do not always get it right, but because of our investment and because of the priorities that we place on our public health system, we have the best healthcare system in the country.