

Question on Notice
No. 627
Asked on 21 April 2006

Mr CHOI asked the Premier (Mr Beattie) -

QUESTION:

With reference to the continuous shortage of doctors and nurses in Queensland—

Will he advise whether the Federal Government has provided adequate leadership in addressing this issue?

ANSWER:

The Productivity Commission Report on Australia's Health Workforce released earlier this year identified that the major cause of the national medical workforce shortage, which is not unique to Queensland, is insufficient education and training places, especially in the university system.

This is a core responsibility of the Australian Government. While the Australian Government controls the number of university places, over the past two decades they have not allocated enough medical places to keep pace with Queensland's growing population and health demands.

Queensland has one of the lowest ratios of doctors per head of population. The latest available Commonwealth figures on doctor numbers published in *Medical Labour Force 2003*, which is produced by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Canberra, show that Queensland has 241 medical practitioners per 100,000 population, compared with Victoria (301), New South Wales (287), Tasmania (280), and Western Australia (241). Compounding this, Queensland's medical workforce is the most geographically distributed of any State and Territory in Australia and has the fastest population growth rate (nearly double the national rate according to ABS data).

In February 2006, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) asked Senior Officials to provide COAG with detailed information on the number of additional Commonwealth student places required, along with related measures to ameliorate the health workforce shortage and report back to COAG in mid 2006. Senior Officials have also been considering the recent Productivity Commission's report into Australia's health workforce.

State and territory officials complied with the request for detailed information and provided the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet with the initial estimates of health workforce needs as they translate into additional Commonwealth funded university places on 7 April 2006.

Queensland identified a need to train an additional 325 doctors each year, as well as an additional 800 nurses and 200 allied health professionals.

Ignoring this data, on 8 April 2006 the Prime Minister unilaterally announced an additional 400 medical school places and 1,000 higher education nursing places each year.

The Prime Minister's package is a contradiction, on one hand it acknowledges that the Australian Government has responsibility for the doctor shortage, yet on the other it still inadequately funds university places. It neglects allied health and does not address the health workforce needs identified by States and Territories.

Despite the states and territories advising that there was a need for a minimum of 955 new doctor training places, the Prime Minister announced a total of 400 new places across Australia, less than half, with a minimum 160 of these allocated to Victoria.

The Prime Minister has stated that the package has also addressed a nationwide shortage of nurses. However, while the states and territories identified a shortfall of over 6,000 nurses nationwide, only a mere 1,000 additional places were announced. In fact, almost seven times that number is required to address the national need.

In contrast with the lack of leadership by the Australian Government, the Queensland Government has not only been investing in reforming our health system in the areas for which we are responsible, but also doing the Australian Government's job, with an investment in additional medical places at Griffith and in securing 60 full-fee paying medical positions for the University of Queensland in partnership with Greenslopes Private Hospital.

It's clear that funding student places at university is an Australian Government responsibility. While the additional places announced by the Prime Minister are recognition of the chronic under-funding of these places in the past, they fail to address the identified health workforce shortages. The Australian Government needs to act to deliver the additional higher education places required.