

Question on Notice

No. 1341

Asked on 25 October 2023

MR S KNUTH asked the Minister for Health, Mental Health and Ambulance Services and the Minister for Women (HON S FENTIMAN)—

QUESTION

With reference to the announced closure of the Private Health Hospital in Cairns —

Will the Minister commit to allowing private obstetricians to immediately work in the region's public hospitals as a solution to the current shortage of maternity workers in the Far North and to meet the urgent need for specialist care for high-risk patients currently transitioning from private care to public hospital care?

ANSWER

The Cairns and Hinterland Hospital and Health Service (the Health Service) offers public birthing services for all birthing women in the Far North.

I am advised more than 2,000 babies were born at the Cairns Hospital last representing 91% of births within the Far North. The Cairns Hospital is also the major referral hospital for women from the Tablelands, Cassowary Coast, Cape York and Torres Strait regions.

For many years, women who become critically unwell during their pregnancy have their care transferred from the private sector to the Cairns Hospital.

The decision-making process regarding the granting of private admitting rights for any practitioner at any public hospital is a complex matter best determined by the Chief Executive of the relevant Hospital and Health Service.

This decision requires consideration of a range of local factors including the current models of care offered at that public facility, the impact on patient care and the broader care needs of the community to ensure that any decision aligns with the best interests of staff, all patients and the public facility.

There are wider and more complex implications to permitting private obstetricians to work within a public hospital. These factors include operating theatre capacity and additional staffing resources such as theatre staff, anaesthetists and pharmacists, along with ensuring cultural alignment between the two services in every respect such as quality, safety and team dynamics.

I understand the priority of the Health Service Chief Executive is to ensure resources are firstly deployed to meet the needs of all public patients as well as ensuring operating theatres are available for those who require elective surgery and have been waiting on a list for some time.

I am advised that all the women who were planning to birth at the private hospital and have chosen to birth at the Cairns Hospital have had appointments, been seen and have been booked in for ongoing care.

I also understand that Cairns Hospital staff work together in shared antenatal care arrangements with GPs and private obstetricians to provide maternity care to women in the community.

To assist with this transition, the Palaszczuk Government has invested \$10 million to increase maternity staffing in the Health Service. I am pleased to advise a capital works expansion worth \$1 million has begun at the Cairns Hospital to create a new Maternity Assessment Centre, which will also increase capacity within the existing birth suites.

I understand the Cairns Maternity Unit has had a stable workforce of obstetricians and midwives who work closely together for the best outcomes for birthing women and their babies.

The staff of the Cairns Maternity Unit have done an exceptional job to expand the service and safely transition the care of pregnant women in such a short period of time.