



QUESTION TIME
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

Wednesday, 3 April 2019

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Questions without notice

Canberra Health Services—consent for procedures

MR COE: My question is for the Minister for Health and Wellbeing. Minister, what does it take to substantiate a patient's claim that she was "forced into a vaginal examination without consent"?

MS FITZHARRIS: I will take the question on notice. It requires clinical input for me to appropriately answer that question.

MR COE: Minister, in the event that you need clinical advice, why is it that you dismissed the claim on the basis that it was not substantiated?

MS FITZHARRIS: I have not dismissed the complaint. I indicated on a number of occasions that the complaint was taken seriously; that all complaints are taken seriously.

MRS DUNNE: Minister, how many consumer feedback submissions have you dismissed on the basis that they were not substantiated?

MS FITZHARRIS: None.

Ginninderry—development

MS LE COUTEUR: My question is to the Treasurer and relates to his proposed arrangement for the New South Wales part of the cross-border Ginninderry development. According to yesterday's *Canberra Times*, New South Wales residents will be paying ACT-level rates for ACT government-provided services. Will residents pay ACT-level stamp duty, or the higher New South Wales stamp duty?

MR BARR: In response to Ms Le Couteur, firstly, any cross-border development is at least a decade away, into the 2030s. The ACT's preferred position remains that the border shift. I believe that the *Canberra Times* reported that that would not happen. I do not think that there is any basis to make the statement that it would not happen. It remains an ongoing discussion between ACT, New South Wales and Australian governments and the Yass Valley Council. So on one level the question is hypothetical. Our preference remains that the border move. It is not an urgent issue. It will not be one that will need to be considered for at least a decade.

If the border is not moved, then some form of memorandum of understanding between the ACT, New South Wales and Yass will need to be struck. Those issues would need to be considered at that time. That would of course depend on the relative settings of stamp duty in New South Wales at that time compared to the ACT; the relative settings of local government charges in New South Wales in that council area and in the ACT; and on the types of services that were being provided. A statement of principle would be that ACT residents would not be subsidising the services of those in that part of the development were it to be in New South Wales. But I reiterate that our preference remains that the border move. That reduces the complications considerably.

MS LE COUTEUR: Given that the border has in fact not moved, are we having a situation where residents will get ACT services but vote in New South Wales? Is this effectively a proposal for taxation without representation?

MR BARR: No, definitely not a proposal in that regard. No residents will be subject to any arrangements at this point and none will be until the 2030s. There is a lot of time to resolve this issue. There will be numerous chief ministers and premiers before there is any development in that area as it is more than a decade away. I assure members I will not be the Chief Minister in 2030—I can give you that commitment—there will be new New South Wales premiers and, on our current rate of churning through prime ministers, unless there is a change of government next month, the Liberal Party will certainly churn through at least five prime ministers in a decade, on their current form.

MS CODY: Chief Minister, what services do rates get you in the ACT that are not available to New South Wales council ratepayers?

MR BARR: Of course our unique governance structure that sees us provide both local government and state government services means that rates paid in the ACT also go to the provision of health, education, police and emergency services, community services—things like housing, for example—as well as economic development and tourism and services that are provided at a state level. The two are not comparable, clearly, because the remit of local government in New South Wales is much narrower. Where there is an overlap is in the provision, for example, of waste collection services and some planning services but not all, as many are handled at a state level within New South Wales as well.

There are clear points of difference. This is one of the complexities of any cross-border arrangement that would see that development be in New South Wales but only accessible through the ACT and with ACT services being the only logical provision.

That is why I think it is fundamental that the border move—and that remains our position—and I see no reason why that cannot occur, because it is the most sensible outcome. But again I stress that it is not an immediate concern. It is one that we will need to address as governments in the next 10 years.

Canberra Health Services—unauthorised examinations

MRS JONES: My question is to the Minister for Health and Wellbeing. Minister, regarding the aforementioned examinations, in the six weeks between 7 February and 21 March, what did Canberra Health Services do to inform its initial advice to you that there had been no consumer complaints?

MS FITZHARRIS: I note that my original statement was made in the sitting of 21 March, when I said:

Canberra Health Services have investigated that and said that it is not the case but they will continue to look very closely at this.

That is what they have done, and I referred yesterday in my answers to a range of meetings that have taken place. This is, as was discussed yesterday, a serious matter. I am glad that Mrs Dunne was able to take up an opportunity this morning to be briefed by the CEO of Canberra Health Services. I do intend, given the Assembly's interest in this, and notwithstanding the current maternity services inquiry, to make a full statement to the Assembly on a range of matters that have been undertaken since, and will be undertaken over the next few weeks, in the May sittings.

MRS JONES: Minister, between 7 February and 21 March, what went wrong in Canberra Health Services that the initial advice was incorrect?

MS FITZHARRIS: I have discussed this with Canberra Health Services and have let them know my clear expectation that I should have been advised of the review that was subsequently undertaken, but I will take the specifics of that on notice in terms of a chronology between 7 February and 21 March. I did refer yesterday to an email that was sent from within maternity services to all staff following receipt from the consumer feedback area.

MRS DUNNE: Minister, who was aware of the complaint in the Canberra Hospital, and who briefed you that there had been no complaint?

MS FITZHARRIS: Two questions there: who was aware and who briefed me. I will take on notice who was aware because clearly, as I indicated in my previous answer, an email was sent internally within maternity services upon receipt of that complaint.

My initial verbal advice following the publication of the *Canberra Times* article was in a verbal briefing with Canberra Health Services on 13 March.

Centenary Hospital for Women and Children—consent for procedures

MR HANSON: My question is to the Minister for Health and Wellbeing. On 21 March you told the Assembly that the allegations of vaginal examinations being performed at the Centenary hospital without consent caused distress to staff. You expressed no concern about the woman who complained that she was forced to have a vaginal examination at the Centenary hospital without consent. Why have you not expressed any concern about the woman who allegedly had a vaginal examination performed without consent?

MS FITZHARRIS: I am very concerned about this matter, including, of course, about the woman who has made that complaint. Unfortunately that is not someone we can contact because that submission was made anonymously. I have expressed my concern about the seriousness of this matter. I can reiterate to all members present that at the time of the publication of the *Canberra Times* article and the subsequent meeting that was undertaken at Canberra Health Services a high level of concern among staff had been conveyed to me.

MR HANSON: Minister, will you now apologise to the woman who had a vaginal examination done without consent and apologise for your previous denials?

MS FITZHARRIS: Could I clarify for Mr Hanson that, although this matter

continues to be investigated, there is no evidence currently before CHS that this did occur. What it is clear that occurred was that the complaint was made and, as the minister, I have a clear responsibility to ensure responsibility and due process regarding any complaints that are made. If any allegation about an examination without consent is to be proven, it will be absolutely clear that that is absolutely unacceptable.

But if the opposition—

MADAM SPEAKER: Can you resume your seat please.

Mr Coe: On a point of order, on relevance, Mr Hanson's supplementary question included: would the minister apologise for denying that the event took place? I ask her to be directly relevant with regard to her denial.

MADAM SPEAKER: Mr Coe, there is no point of order. I think that the minister has gone to some lengths to say that there is a serious investigation into the allegation and that needs to be brought to a conclusion.

MRS DUNNE: Minister, will you guarantee that midwives who raise concerns about this issue will not be subject to retribution?

MS FITZHARRIS: Yes, I absolutely will.

Government—airline policy

MS CHEYNE: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, what recent activity has the ACT government undertaken to attract more international airlines to Canberra?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Cheyne for the question. Members will be aware that we have gone from zero international flights to 14 per week in recent years, connecting our city to Asia, the Middle East and on to Europe, through Singapore Airlines and Qatar Airways. The ACT government is continuing to work with our tourism and business partners to expand this global connectivity even further. The goal is for Canberra to ultimately have international aviation connections to key points of the world where there are business opportunities, where there are tourism opportunities and where Canberrans would like to holiday.

Firstly, we are focusing on more access to cities in the Northern Hemisphere, via China, and an eastbound connection to the United States and South America via New Zealand. We have been working with Canberra Airport to negotiate with airlines about reconnecting Canberra and New Zealand. In the final months of Singapore Airlines' service to Wellington, that sector often operated at 70 per cent capacity in a 260-seat wide bodied aircraft and the market had grown by 20 per cent, showing that there is a clear and compelling case to reintroduce a connection with a more appropriately sized narrow bodied aircraft.

Last week, I led a ministerial delegation to China. We were accompanied by representatives from Canberra Airport and VisitCanberra. We met with senior

representatives from China's largest airline, China Southern Airlines, as well as Air China and Beijing Capital Airlines. China is Canberra and Australia's biggest market by both visitor volume and visitor spend, and international direct flights present a significant opportunity for boosting regional tourism, trade, investment, freight and business opportunities.

MS CHEYNE: Chief Minister, what developments are taking place with low-cost carriers?

MR BARR: Again, this time two years ago we had no low-cost carriers operating in our market. Following a concerted campaign by the ACT government and tourism industry partners to demonstrate aviation opportunities that Canberra presents we now have eight services a week and a strong demand for more frequency and new routes.

The success of Tigerair entering the market and connecting Canberra to Melbourne and Brisbane has shown that Canberrans will strongly support low-cost carriers and interstate travellers will strongly support them flying to Canberra. Tigerair now provides 200,000 seats a year, making it more affordable for Canberrans to travel and for leisure visitors to come to our city all year round.

This success combined with record leisure visitors means that there is an opportunity for securing more services and new routes to Canberra Airport. This includes the possibility of expanding Tiger's existing services and for Jetstar to consider Canberra's potential.

I can advise the chamber that I have recently met with the CEOs of both airlines to discuss the possibilities. The ACT government is working in partnership with Canberra Airport and our tourism authorities and with other state governments and their tourism authorities and airports to promote these opportunities. We look forward to that dialogue continuing and the announcement of new low-cost carriers entering our market soon.

MR PETTERSSON: Chief Minister, what have the recent international and low cost carriers coming into Canberra meant for the ACT?

MR BARR: I thank Mr Pettersson for the question. During 2018—the year, of course, that *Lonely Planet* classed Canberra as one of the top three cities in the world to visit—we recorded a record number of both domestic and international visitors. Air access makes a really big difference to those outcomes and supports the growth of our visitor economy.

In 2018, we had 2.79 million Australian and over 251,000 international visitors, making for a combined total of over three million overnight visitors coming to Canberra. Importantly, our international visitor spend increased by 25 per cent for the year ending December 2018, which was well ahead of the national average of eight per cent, meaning that international visitors contributed \$686 million to our local economy in 2018.

Why is this important? It is because it has led to the creation of more jobs and more opportunities for Canberrans. Domestically, we have seen very strong growth in the

Victorian and Queensland markets. That can be directly linked to the commencement of the Tigerair flights between Melbourne and Canberra and Brisbane and Canberra.

Key international markets connected by Singapore Airlines and Qatar Airways are also growing strongly. This includes a further five per cent growth out of China, which is already our strongest market, accounting for one in five of our international visitors. We have seen 35 per cent growth out of Germany, a 25 per cent increase from India and strong growth from the United Kingdom, Singapore and Taiwan.

Canberra Health Services—media statement

MS LAWDER: My question is to the Minister for Health and Wellbeing. Minister, when Canberra Health Services made a media statement on 13 March 2019 about the *Canberra Times*'s reporting of the midwife's submission to the maternity services inquiry, Canberra Health Services were more distressed over the headline than over the incident outlined in the submission and how it might have impacted on the patient.

On 21 March you expressed concern about the way this matter was reported but did not express concern about the impact of this serious incident on the patient. Minister, why are you more concerned about a newspaper headline than the distress suffered by a patient being forced into a vaginal examination without consent?

MS FITZHARRIS: I am not. I think, out of respect to the patient and to staff who work closely with patients every day, we should allow due process to take place, noting that it is very difficult for due process to take place regarding an anonymous complaint. But I am concerned by any report that examinations without consent in maternity services would have taken place. I repeat that in the answer to this question.

MS LAWDER: Minister, did you agree to the media statement made by Canberra Health Services on 21 March?

MS FITZHARRIS: I refer Ms Lawder to the answer that I gave yesterday. I was aware of it but I do not have a role in approving it.

MRS DUNNE: Minister, who is investigating the public statements made in early March and the consumer complaint?

MS FITZHARRIS: I am sorry, I am not sure what Mrs Dunne means by the first part of her question. Could she repeat it, please, Madam Speaker?

MRS DUNNE: Who is investigating the consumer complaint that was made on 7 February? Is anyone investigating the comments made on 13 March by Canberra Health Services and are they investigating the veracity of those statements?

MS FITZHARRIS: I am sorry, I am finding that question very hard to follow. For the first part of the question, which is about a complaint received on 7 February and which Mrs Dunne also received, if Mrs Dunne has any suggestions on how that anonymous feedback can be followed up I would welcome them because there is no information on which to follow up.

As I indicated in a previous answers, a range of activity has been undertaken within Canberra Health Services in recent months and I intend to provide a full statement on that to give the facts to the Assembly in May. As I indicated in March and again yesterday, I was also mindful that the maternity services inquiry of this Assembly is underway and I was respectful of that process as well. But since then there has been a delay in public hearings for this committee because another inquiry has taken precedence.

Centenary Hospital for Women and Children—patient privacy

MR WALL: My question is to the Minister for Health and Wellbeing. Minister, on 21 March you told the Assembly that you had been assured that adequate safeguards are in place to protect the privacy of patients at the Centenary hospital. Minister, what were those assurances?

MS FITZHARRIS: Certainly throughout the course of my responsibilities as the minister for health it is very clear to me that there are a number of privacy considerations, for both clinical and non-clinical staff, in a hospital setting that are adhered to regularly.

MR WALL: Minister, what safeguards have you directed be put in place to protect the privacy of women patients at the Centenary hospital?

MS FITZHARRIS: To be clear: my expectation as minister is that all relevant legislation, regulation, and professional and organisational policies are adhered to.

MRS DUNNE: Minister, what are the processes for ensuring that consent for vaginal examinations is obtained?

MS FITZHARRIS: I understand that in this morning's briefing with the CEO of Canberra Health Services, Mrs Dunne requested a copy of that policy. I believe it should be with her office by the end of the day.

This is Question Time - Apr03-22

Bushfires—season update

MR PETTERSSON: My question is to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services. What update can the minister provide about the bushfire season?

MR GENTLEMAN: I thank the member for this important and timely question. I can advise the Assembly that the Emergency Services Commissioner has extended the bushfire season by one month. This year's season has not been easy. The lead-up to this bushfire season saw some of the driest conditions on record in the ACT and significant active fires in New South Wales. The season's weather has seen a number of extreme weather events develop in the ACT, including heatwave conditions and a week of temperatures above 40 degrees, followed by storm activity producing lightning, high winds and patchy rain. These weather events, particularly in the mountains to the west of the ACT, posed a significant threat of bushfires and grassfires in the ACT and surrounding region. A slight reprieve was felt when the fire danger index, the FDI, reduced from late December 2018 to January 2019, but it rose

steadily after this period. This resulted in three days of total fire ban and 16 very high fire danger days. These conditions were a strong reminder of the risks that Canberra faces as the bush capital.

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, how does this year's season compare to others?

MR GENTLEMAN: The 2018-19 ACT bushfire season has seen Canberra experience conditions of bushfire risk greater than in 2003. With the extension I mentioned earlier, we have also seen the longest season since 2003. However, the benefit of 15 years of strategic planning and actions undertaken to mitigate our most extreme risk through the strategic bushfire management plan, or SBMP, has seen many of those risks prevented or quickly responded to.

The SBMP provides a planned and measured approach to managing the risk to the territory and is reviewed every five years and presented to this Assembly. All actions in the current version are in the final stages of completion, which culminates five years of work from across numerous areas of government. The ESA is currently consulting the community on what the next SBMP should look like, and I encourage all Canberrans to have their say. Go to yoursay.act.gov.au.

I note the warning of the ESA commissioner that, with the influence of climate change, our fire seasons are becoming longer. In the past, incidents such as the Pierces Creek fire, which was in early November last year, would not normally have been seen until after the Christmas period and well into summer.

MS CODY: What investment has the ACT government made to help prepare for the threat of bushfires?

MR GENTLEMAN: I thank Ms Cody for her question. I am delighted to get a question from her on her special day. I want to thank the hardworking staff across our agencies who have kept Canberra safe this season and who continue to do so. The work is led by the commissioner and the dedicated staff across the various services that make up the ESA and also through our hardworking parks and conservation service. They are supported by all directorates, and I want to thank them all.

The ACT government continues to invest in preparing for the threat of bushfires. This season the ESA contracted a specialist intelligence gathering helicopter. The helicopter significantly enhanced bushfire fighting operations by allowing key decision-makers to better understand the extent of situations as they unfolded.

To further improve incident management, the ACT government invested in an upgrade to the incident management facilities at ESA headquarters, which were successfully used to fight the Pierces Creek fire. We are also rolling out new personal protective clothing, including for our ACT Fire & Rescue staff. Madam Speaker, these are just some of the investments this government is making to keep our city safe as it grows.

Centenary Hospital for Women and Children—examinations policy

MR MILLIGAN: My question is to the Minister for Health and Wellbeing. Why did

the Centenary Hospital for Women and Children introduce a policy of having midwives present during vaginal examinations?

MS FITZHARRIS: I will take that question on notice.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, are you aware of any other instances of vaginal examinations being performed without the consent of the patient which led to this policy?

MS FITZHARRIS: No. I note there is a consent policy across Canberra Health Services, which includes maternity services. It was renewed in 2016 and is due for renewal again this year.

MRS DUNNE: Minister, can you be precise and tell the Assembly whether there is any investigation into the matter reported to the Canberra Hospital on 7 February either in your office or in the department?

MS FITZHARRIS: No. On the particular matter received on 7 February there is a range of follow-up actions which are quite extensive and which I will detail in full in the next sitting. The precise consumer feedback received on 7 February did not provide any detail of the individual or the person or the time at which the alleged matter took place. While efforts were made to see if further information could be acquired it was not possible to do so given how scant the information was in that consumer feedback.

I note that Canberra Health Services encourages through their consumer feedback channels that if a person wishes to make an anonymous submission it will respect that submission and respect the request of the person making it.

Canberra Health Services—media statement

MRS KIKKERT: My question is to the Minister for Health and Wellbeing. Minister, in the media statement issued by Canberra Health Services on 13 March 2019, it was stated, “The allegations are misleading and unfair.” And yet Canberra Health Services knew that a complaint had been made. Indeed, a staff meeting to discuss the complaint and the issue it raised about protocols associated with medical procedures had been held only the day before. Minister, why did you allow Canberra Health Services to make media statements that, in themselves, were misleading and unfair to the concerns raised by the patient?

MS FITZHARRIS: As I indicated before, Canberra Health Services wished to make this statement. I was aware of it but did not have role in approving it.

MRS KIKKERT: Minister, what media statements have Canberra Health Services made expressing their concern over how the patient might be feeling?

MS FITZHARRIS: As members are aware, Canberra Health Services, on this matter, have released only one media statement.

MRS DUNNE: Minister, what proportion of consumer feedback is provided

anonymously, and is it the practice to give the benefit of the doubt to people who complain about their treatment at Canberra Health Services?

MS FITZHARRIS: I caught the first part of that question or the first question in that question, but not the subsequent one. Could Mrs Dunne repeat that, please.

MRS DUNNE: The second part of the question was: is it the practice to give the benefit of the doubt to people who make claims about their treatment at Canberra Health Services?

MS FITZHARRIS: Madam Speaker, I would take your guidance on multiple questions that have a number of questions in them. I will take the first part of the question on notice in terms of what proportion are anonymous.

MADAM SPEAKER: The question will be in order. It is a practice that there are parts to questions. The standing orders reflect that the question shall be brief and to a single issue, though.

MS FITZHARRIS: As to the second part of the question, from my discussions with the CEO, and she has also indicated it publicly, including in an interview yesterday, yes, all complaints are taken seriously.

ACT Health—workplace culture

MISS C BURCH: My question is to the Minister for Health and Wellbeing. I refer to the Reid report into Health culture, which found that:

The information gathered from submissions, individual and group interviews and the staff survey reveal a worrying and pervasive poor culture across the ACT Public Health System.

Minister, how long has there been a worrying and pervasive poor culture across ACT public health?

MS FITZHARRIS: I do not think a precise timeline can be put on it but I note that in his statements upon the release of the report Mr Reid indicated that it was decades.

MISS C BURCH: Minister, what areas of ACT Health have you targeted as requiring the most urgent attention?

MS FITZHARRIS: There are a number of areas within ACT public health services that require some work on their culture. That is absolutely the case. Members will be aware that Mr Reid indicated that he would write to me about these areas. He has done so and I have had the opportunity to discuss this with the culture review oversight group, which met for the first time last week.

MRS DUNNE: Minister, why have successive Labor governments over the past 18 years allowed poor culture to fester in ACT Health?

MS FITZHARRIS: I disagree with the premise of that question. Last week we had

the first meeting of the culture review oversight group, from which there was a communique. It was an excellent meeting. We agreed on a number of issues, but one of the more important ones was to invite four additional members to join that oversight group. I will be delighted to welcome them into the group for its next meeting in June.

Municipal services—Heritage Library

MS CODY: My question is to the Minister for City Services. Minister, how does the relocation of the ACT Heritage Library help the government to preserve Canberra's history?

MR STEEL: I thank Ms Cody for her question. I was delighted to open the new ACT Heritage Library last month. The relocation represents the ACT government's continuing commitment to preserving the rich history of our city and providing better facilities for the community to engage with the ACT's heritage. The ACT Heritage Library helps tell the stories of Canberra's people and history, and this larger space will help house the ACT's growing and unique collection of irreplaceable items.

The library collects and stores a variety of different documents including newspapers, photographs, maps, books and diaries as well as digital material and microfilm. The previous location at Woden library was reaching 96 per cent capacity, so the relocation will provide the library with secure and expanded storage so that they can continue their fantastic work.

The larger space at the ACT Heritage Library at 255 Canberra Avenue in Fyshwick will provide more opportunities to have regular displays in the library, providing better opportunities to showcase our history. During the Heritage Festival on at the moment the exhibition *Track me to the moon* is now displaying records of Canberra's very significant contribution to the moon landings.

The ACT government Heritage Library is also collocated with Archives ACT. Archives ACT is a fantastic resource for those who want to learn more about our city's rich history. There is a space for Canberrans to engage with these records in the reading room as well.

Another excellent service provided by our libraries is the ability to look back through digitised newspapers from the past, and the heritage library should be recognised as a significant contributor to the trove project nationally. If you were to search the births, deaths and marriages of digitised newspapers for this very day about 40 years ago you might find the birth of a very significant member of this place. Happy birthday, Ms Cody.

MS CODY: Minister, what will the previous location of the Heritage Library be used for?

MR STEEL: I thank Ms Cody for her supplementary question. Previously the Heritage Library was located at Woden on the mezzanine level. As the population of Woden grows, I am pleased that the relocation of the Heritage Library into its new premises at Fyshwick will provide more community space in the Woden town centre

while we continue to plan for a new community centre for Woden.

There is significant demand on the south side for larger community spaces for meetings and activities. The previous location of the Heritage Library will be opened up to allow for the community to use the space and for Woden library to deliver its variety of programs, such as language and English conversation; health, wellbeing and support; parents groups; hobby groups; business meetings and workshops; community council meetings; and government meetings and consultations in the future.

I have also asked Libraries ACT to explore ways that community groups can access the other community space at Woden library, once occupied by Access Canberra, so that this section of Woden library can be opened up after hours and more community groups are able to use the space available.

MS ORR: Minister, what are the broader benefits of this relocation?

MR STEEL: I thank Ms Orr for her supplementary. While this relocation will ensure the ongoing preservation of and access to the documentary heritage of the ACT community, there are also broader benefits for the Canberra community now and into the future. One of the considerations of the relocation is that Canberra's population is growing and our heritage collection is growing with it.

The new location provides room for the collection of diverse publications, archival collections, images, maps, plans and books for community use. I know they are always interested in getting more material that is significant to the ACT's heritage.

The new space also provides additional safety for the stored records, which are located in a box within a box, with fire retardant walls and climate control to manage both temperature and humidity conditions for often fragile paper and other materials.

At the new location, parking will also be convenient, with some free parking nearby and unmetered two-hour parking adjacent to the Heritage Library in Fyshwick, thus making the library accessible. I believe that at the commencement of our new bus network, it will be the No 2 bus that people will be able to catch to access the library on our new network 19 bus system.

ACT Health—NGO funding

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Health and Wellbeing. Non-government organisations have been waiting to hear from ACT Health about variations to funding agreements by the end of last month. ACT Health has now advised NGOs that it hopes to finalise negotiations by the end of April to ensure that the new arrangements are in place by the end of June. What are the reasons for the delays in finalising negotiations with health non-government organisations?

MS FITZHARRIS: I am aware that there are ongoing discussions with a range of very important NGO partners. I will take the question on notice.

MR PARTON: Minister, will you guarantee that ACT Health will finish negotiations by the end of April and that all funding agreements will be in place by the end of

June?

MS FITZHARRIS: I certainly expect that all funding arrangements will be in place by the end of June, and I will take specific advice on the exact time for when negotiations will conclude.

MRS DUNNE: Minister, when will health non-government organisations have certainty in funding?

MS FITZHARRIS: They have certainty in funding. I know that there was significant work undertaken with the NGOs towards the end of last year about ongoing certainty for them in funding over multiple years. I was very pleased to be able to provide them with that level of certainty. I will take the previous questions on notice and believe that that will answer Mrs Dunne's subsequent question as well.

ACT Policing—assault victims

MS LEE: My question is to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services. When victims of sexual assault or domestic violence come forward what is the procedure and training for frontline staff in how to handle those allegations?

MR GENTLEMAN: I thank Ms Lee for her important question. I have been working with ACT police over the past 14 years in regard to domestic violence, particularly the sorts of violence Ms Lee raised, both in my role as a white ribbon ambassador and in my current role as Minister for Police and Emergency Services. There are a number of detailed operational matters that police are involved with when it comes to the reporting and investigation of these sorts of actions. They take a long-term and very detailed approach to ensuring the safety of particular people in these situations and ensure that their wellbeing is looked after at the same time.

They are involved with a number of Canberra groups that assist people in these situations; the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre is a very good example. There is a whole team in ACT Policing dedicated to this sort of work. Every officer is trained in, if you like, personal situations with family violence and those sorts of matters.

In regard to the detail of the operations, that is up to police. It does change not regularly but it does change from time to time. Dedicated officers are also on board and ready to respond.

MS LEE: Minister, how are anonymous allegations of domestic violence or sexual assault handled by front-line staff?

MR GENTLEMAN: All reports to ACT police are taken as reports and investigated from there on.

MRS JONES: Minister, is support provided to front-line staff who deal with these types of complaints whilst also supporting the investigation into these serious allegations?

MR GENTLEMAN: Yes. We have health and wellbeing officers embedded in

ACT Policing. There is a general theme for ensuring the safety of all front-line police as they operate on the ground, whether it is in these matters or other matters of policing. That is followed up with the health and wellbeing officers as well.

Centenary Hospital for Women and Children—unauthorised examinations

MRS DUNNE: My question is to the Minister for Health and Wellbeing. Minister, nearly 12 months ago you received an anonymous letter from nurses and midwives at the Centenary Hospital for Women and Children. In it they said:

It is only a matter of time before there is an adverse outcome for a mother, baby or staff member.

On 7 February this year a patient at the Centenary hospital complained that she was forced into a vaginal examination without her consent. Minister, could you have done more to prevent this alleged assault from occurring?

MS FITZHARRIS: There has been significant work undertaken, particularly in maternity services, over the past 12 months. What I have done is to ensure that there is proper governance and leadership in both Canberra Health Services and our ACT Health Directorate.

I was very clear also that we needed to relieve some of the pressure on the Centenary hospital, which is why I insisted upon an upgrade to and an expansion of the Calvary public hospital's maternity capacity. That has since opened and is now wonderfully being able to take up more women across Canberra to have their babies.

A range of activities is underway prompted by the submissions to the maternity services inquiry. They have been part of the discussions in maternity services over the past 12 months. I have paid close attention both to those matters and to expanding and improving the access to and the quality of maternity services in the ACT.

Members may also be aware that we have released for public consultation the ACT's approach to public maternity services. That work has also been underway over the past 12 months, particularly with the Women's Centre for Health Matters, who undertook a significant level of stakeholder consultation to inform the development of this new model of care. This is a very exciting opportunity for women in Canberra, and I encourage anyone who may want to make a submission to the current broader community consultation to do so. It is a wonderful new model and I think it will continue to serve Canberra women and their families very well.

So a range of matters has been followed up. We will continue to do so because—
(*Time expired.*)

MRS DUNNE: Minister, why is it the case that there does not seem to be the capacity for front-line staff to follow up such serious allegations as that which the health service received on 7 February?

MS FITZHARRIS: I do not agree that there is not the capacity. I certainly know that

the staff in our maternity services, particularly at Centenary, work extremely hard. They are highly valued by the Canberra community. I know that there is also significant data available that speaks to the quality of outcomes from Centenary hospital.

Some of that data has been provided to the maternity services inquiry and I have encouraged Canberra Health Services to make more data available through the context of that maternity services inquiry so that the Canberra community can be in no doubt about the very high quality of care and the very good data that is available that demonstrates this very high quality of care.

I certainly take a complaint seriously but what I also take seriously is the feedback we have, which is overwhelmingly positive, about the staff who undertake our really important work caring for women, families and babies 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I balance appropriately my concern about individual complaints with the ongoing wellbeing and support of Canberra Health Services staff.

MS LAWDER: Minister, have you contacted the person who contacted you on Saturday about this matter?

MS FITZHARRIS: As I indicated yesterday, that contact was made anonymously. I have had discussions with my office and I will follow up on that.

Mrs Dunne: Point of order. Just by way of clarity, the person who contacted Ms Fitzharris on Saturday contacted her by email. The question was: has she responded to it?

MS FITZHARRIS: It is certainly the plan that my office is to respond. I will take advice on whether that has occurred. Madam Speaker, I would be clear that, as the opposition know, the signature was 'Anonymous'. It is also the case that I do respect initially—I absolutely do respect—someone who signs off an email as 'Anonymous'.

Children and young people—out of home care

MS ORR: My question is to the Minister for Children, Youth and Families: what is the government doing to ensure that the voices of carers are heard in the out of home care system?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Orr for her ongoing interest in the role of carers in our out of home care system. The government is committed to hearing the voices of kinship and foster carers in the ongoing implementation of our five-year out of home care strategy, A step up for our kids. Carers play a critical role in delivering trauma-informed care to some of the most vulnerable children and young people in our community.

In 2017 we formalised the role of the carer wellbeing subcommittee within the governance arrangements for A step up for our kids to ensure that kinship and foster carers have a direct role in influencing the implementation of the strategy. The role of this subcommittee is to monitor and report on the wellbeing of carers, advise on strategies to support the role of carers within the strategy and monitor how the

strategy impacts on the carer experience. On this subcommittee carer representatives sit alongside representatives from ACT Together, Carers ACT and the Community Services Directorate. The subcommittee reports to the joint governance group which oversees the implementation of A step up for our kids.

In February I had the opportunity to attend a meeting of the subcommittee to discuss the outcomes of the recent carer survey which the group commissioned. The survey provided an opportunity to hear directly from carers about their experiences and the circumstances which make caring either easier or more stressful. More than 200 carers responded to the survey, and I appreciate the time they took to share their views and experiences.

The findings were mixed and certainly point to a number of areas where improvements are required to better support carers in their role, particularly in the area of communication and involvement in decision-making. The carer wellbeing subcommittee and partner agencies across A step up for our kids are committed to addressing the findings of the survey and to improving carers' experiences and, by extension, the care they offer children and young people.

MS ORR: Minister, What action has the ACT government taken to ensure that carers are supported in their role?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Orr for the supplementary. The ACT government is committed to supporting kinship and foster carers in a role that is extremely rewarding but also very challenging. Under A step up for our kids the government has introduced a range of supports, including trauma-informed training for carers and independent carer advocacy through Carers ACT. As I mentioned earlier, the recent carer survey showed that there is more to be done, including better access to clear and timely information as well as support for carers to care for the children and young people they look after.

The government recently launched a new handbook for carers which provides comprehensive information about being a kinship or foster carer in the ACT. The carer handbook provides clear information about child protection processes. Specifically it includes information about what to expect as a kinship or foster carer; how the out of home care system works in the ACT; caring for a child who has experienced trauma; working with Child and Youth Protection Services and ACT Together case managers and staff; the importance of carers looking after themselves; and the supports and services available to carers and the children in their care. The carer handbook has been developed by the Community Services Directorate in partnership with ACT Together and Carers ACT and in consultation with kinship and foster carers. It is now available on line and all carers will receive a hard copy of the handbook in the next couple of weeks.

The ACT government has also taken a decision to continue grandfathered subsidies for carers that were due to expire in June this year. Carers who are impacted by this change will receive a letter in the coming days with further information, if they have not already. The continuation of these grandfathered subsidy arrangements is one more way that we are recognising the importance of stability for children and young people and the support that carers provide for them.

MS CHEYNE: Minister, given the sometimes unexpected nature of kinship care, what other support is being provided to kinship carers?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Cheyne for the supplementary. A step up for our kids prioritises the placement of children and young people with kin over other forms of available care, where this is possible and where it is in the best interests of the child or young person. We know that this can place a strain on family members as they take on new roles as primary carers.

Through A step up for our kids, we have developed specific programs to support kinship carers. This includes child and youth protection services partnering with the Australian National University to deliver the connect for kinship parents program, which was launched in early 2018.

The connect for kinship parents program is a nine-week strengths-based program that utilises a trauma and attachment-informed approach to support kinship carers of children aged eight to 16 years. Each week of the program covers a new principle relating to kinship parenting, attachment and child development. Carers can flexibly apply these principles, and feedback to date has been extremely positive.

The program targets the building blocks of secure attachment, specifically: reflective parenting, that is, awareness of your own and the child's mental states, including feelings, desires and thoughts, and how these underpin behaviour; parenting sensitivity, that is, being tuned in, open and attentive to children's feelings and thoughts and responding in a way that promotes a safe haven and secure base; emotional regulation within the relationship, utilising the relationship as a context in which the child can manage difficult emotions and feel supported; and shared partnership, joining with the child to promote emotional reciprocity in the relationship.

The evidence base supporting best practice in child protection and out of home care is constantly evolving. This program also forms part of a research project conducted by the ANU that will evaluate the immediate and long-term effects of the program on child and carer wellbeing, the quality of carer-child relationships and placement stability.

Mr Barr: Madam Speaker, further questions can be placed on the notice paper.