

2018.06.26

Deputy M. Tadier of the Minister for Health and Social Services regarding average waiting times to see consultants: [OQ.79/2018]

Will the Minister advise whether any average waiting times to see consultants or for subsequent medical procedures for non-private practice have been assessed as being unacceptably long; and, if so, will he state in which areas and what steps he will take to reduce those waiting times?

The Deputy of St. Ouen (The Minister for Health and Social Services):

Yes, I would like to assure the Deputy and Members that if any patient has an urgent medical need, that patient will be seen very quickly. I am confident that urgent and cancer-related consultant referrals are being dealt with in a timely way and the department monitors and manages that position on a continuous basis. But regrettably for some routine pathways, there are some unacceptable delays and our areas of most concern at the moment for long waits include mental health, dermatology, orthodontics, and endocrinology.

[12:00]

The main reason for those long waits is, unsurprisingly, a shortage of specialty doctors. Members will know the difficulty in all health services in the Western world in recruiting and retaining sufficient doctors. In some cases this is coupled with a rise in the demand for the service, for example, we are all so much more aware of the risks of skin cancer now, which has meant, thank goodness, that more people are attending dermatology services and so there is a greater demand upon that particular service. The department continues to advertise for staff and try different recruiting initiatives for vacant posts and we are also exploring different ways of working, for example, if a doctor is unavailable, can the patient see a specialist nurse or a therapist and have their needs met? Thank you.

10.7.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

I am glad that the Minister mentioned orthodontics and dermatology. Two constituents of mine contacted me before and after the elections, one of whom has dermatitis. She is a carer for her husband and it is probably directly linked to the stress that she is under. Nine months is what she has been told to wait for that particular condition. Another has a child who needs braces and they have been waiting 3 years already with nothing even heard back from the hospital about when he might be treated. I am glad it is on the Minister's radar. Does he feel that there is any scope to publish waiting times for all of these areas and would that be something that he would be willing to do?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

When I sought election to this position, I said that I did wish to be more open, and I still maintain that view. I see no difficulty in withholding information about waiting times, and that should be publicly available, and I will investigate clearer ways of making that available.

The Bailiff:

Do you mean you see no difficulty in not withholding?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

In not publishing. Yes, I want to make the information available. Sorry if I am not expressing myself well.

10.7.2 Deputy R. Ward:

Can I ask the Minister: given the recognition of a shortage of nurses and medical staff, would you support and recommend an ending to nurses and medical workers' pay freezes and below R.P.I. (Retail Price Index) pay uplifts as soon as possible and as a matter of urgency in order to retain and recruit medical staff?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Well the question of the terms and conditions of medical staff is a matter for the States Employment Board and not for the Minister, but I do know work is going on at this very moment trying to put a new package of terms and conditions for the nurses.

10.7.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister mentioned the 2 factors of recruitment and retention. What new initiative, if any, does the Minister have such that he intends to target that in a year's time these waiting lists are reduced? What does he propose doing, if anything, in order to do that so that in 12 months' time when he comes back to us, he can say: "Oh, I have cleared these waiting lists"?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Would it not be wonderful if I could announce suddenly a new initiative? I am afraid I cannot do that and there is no simple magic answer that I can come up with in the few short weeks I have been in office. It is a priority which I know is being addressed within the department to do as much as we can. I want very soon to gain a greater understanding of the pressures of this and see if there is anything further that can be done. But I do know we have good departmental support that does try to recruit this workforce, but it is known that despite best efforts, it is a very difficult thing to do in so many jurisdictions.

10.7.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

If I may? I am not after a magic answer; what I am after is some sort of strategic way forward such that we can eliminate in Jersey these particular waiting lists. I will even stretch the marker so that in 18 months' time we have achieved some progress on these waiting lists. Will the Minister consider new initiatives? Because there is no point in doing the same, but harder, and failing to meet these waiting lists. Will he work on devising a new scheme to succeed where others have failed?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Of course I will consider new initiatives but if anyone has any further ideas that have not yet been tried, if the Deputy has further ideas, then I would willingly receive them. More than that I cannot say.

10.7.5 Deputy M. Tadier:

Clearly there will be many strands to this issue and possible solutions, but is the Minister satisfied that the balance between private practice and public practice and the waiting lists thereof are balanced correctly? Does he think there is any scope for reviewing that and finding out whether waiting lists could be reduced if that balance was recalibrated somehow?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

The hospital consultants we have are contracted to work a certain number of hours in the hospital service for public patients and my understanding is that work, those hours, are monitored and those hours are fulfilled by the consultants. So, at present information, I do not believe there is any difficulty; I do not believe that is the problem here.