

House: Legislative Assembly- Grievance
Date: Thursday, 6 September 2007
Member: **Castrilli, Mr John; McGinty, Mr Jim**
Subject: **SPINAL SURGERY - WAITING LIST**
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SPINAL SURGERY - WAITING LIST

Grievance

MR G.M. CASTRILLI (Bunbury) [9.07 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Health. I bring to the attention of the minister and the Parliament my concerns about the unacceptable waiting times for spinal surgery patients. I previously brought to the minister's attention the case of Mr Kevin Edmunds of Bunbury. This 45-year-old man is enduring terrible pain while waiting for spinal fusion surgery. In December 2006, Kevin was assessed as a category 2 patient and placed on a waiting list. According to the Central Wait List Bureau of the Department of Health, fewer than 10 per cent of category 2 patients should be waiting for longer than 90 days. Mr Edmunds has been on the waiting list, in agony, for 276 days, which is three times the acceptable wait time set by the Department of Health. No surgery date has yet been set.

Mr J.A. McGinty: Mr Kemp, is it?

Mr G.M. CASTRILLI: No, Mr Edmunds.

On 13 July, Mr Edmunds received a follow-up letter from the Department of Health, after it had received inquiries from me and the member for Dawesville. The letter advised that it anticipated a further four to five months' waiting time for Mr Edmunds. To rub salt into the wound, the letter concluded by advising Mr Edmunds in large, bold print, that "This is an estimate only and not a guaranteed surgery time". We are advised that Mr Edmunds is in eleventh place on the list. What does that mean? An additional four months would mean that he will have been waiting 375 days; more than 12 months. If he is eleventh on the waiting list and has been waiting this long without a surgery date having been set, what does it mean for the hundreds of other patients further down the waiting list?

His case is not an isolated one, although his circumstances are extreme. He is the primary carer for his wife, Teresa, who has severe sclerosis and is entirely dependent upon her husband. With Kevin now incapacitated, both Kevin and Teresa are in total crisis. The only available relief for Kevin's severe pain is narcotic analgesics, which are highly addictive. He is forced to take morphine three times a day in an effort to perform the minimum duties of care for him and his wife. I fear that our health system is forcing him to become a drug addict. Again, I stress that after 276 days on the waiting list, no surgery date has been set for Mr Edmunds. As I mentioned, this is not an isolated case.

Two other spinal surgery patients from my electorate have come to me for help. One was told that she may be waiting for more than two years for her surgery. This 48-year-old woman's condition has forced her onto a disability pension for the past 12 months, but she must wait until February 2008 to even have an appointment with a surgeon for assessment to be put on the waiting list. The other case involves a 34-year-

old man who required spinal surgery. The minister asked a moment ago about this man, whose name is Arran Kemp. Arran had a bulging disc that was pressing on a nerve, and this degenerative condition was worsening with the delay in surgery. This young man has a wife and a three-year-old son and had another baby on the way. He has been forced to rely on Centrelink payments for the past nine months. This young man has never been out of work before and struggled to come to terms, both mentally and physically, with not only his condition but also the financial strain that this had placed on his family. He was also a category 2 patient. He has fared somewhat better than Kevin, as he was at least given a surgery date. However, he had to endure the mental anguish of having his operation cancelled three times. He was initially told that the operation would occur on 6 August, but it was cancelled. His surgery was then booked for 16 August but it was also cancelled. He was then given the date of 28 August, but less than 24 hours before the scheduled surgery he was again contacted and told that it had been cancelled. The continued cancellation of surgery placed great stress and strain on this young family. Their lives were thrown into turmoil as surgery was finally scheduled for the same week in which Arran's wife was due to deliver their second child. The strain took its toll on the family. His wife was hospitalised with stress symptoms. Last week, Arran told his story on radio. It seems that it was only then that he received an assurance that his surgery would not be cancelled a fourth time but would definitely occur on 4 September. A lot has happened since last week. Arran's wife gave birth to a son on Friday. Arran then had to leave his wife and new child to go to Perth on Monday. Thankfully, on Tuesday, after three cancellations, Arran underwent surgery. The family are grateful that the surgery has now occurred, but I ask: did they have to go through the ordeal that the system put them through?

Last week the acting executive director of Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital advised that August was the sixth month in a row in which the number of people who are waiting for elective surgery had fallen to its lowest point since 1999. If that is true, why was Arran's surgery cancelled three times? Is the number of people on the elective surgery waiting list falling because it is so hard to even get on the waiting list? Is it because people such as the 48-year-old mother whom I spoke about earlier are waiting to get on the waiting list? It is the additional waiting list to see a neurosurgeon or specialist for assessment that has masked the real number of people who are waiting for surgery. This situation is not acceptable for Kevin, Arran and many others. The minister said on a GWN television program on 4 July 2007 that, by October this year, nobody in Western Australia would ever wait a year for surgery. How will the minister achieve this target, given that October is not very far away? When will Kevin Edmunds get his surgery? I drew the minister's attention to Kevin's problems in a letter that I sent him last week. Kevin's wife has now been hospitalised and Kevin is suffering from severe depression. How much longer does this family have to be treated in this way? I ask the minister to please advise why Kevin has been left to suffer for more than three times the acceptable waiting time for an operation? Can the minister advise why Kevin Edmunds has not been allocated a surgery time and when he will be advised of a surgery date? I hope that the minister can intervene and assist me in this case so that Kevin Edmunds can get a surgery date as soon as possible, because his situation is grave and serious.

MR J.A. McGINTY (Fremantle - Minister for Health) [9.13 am]: Of the two patients that the member for Bunbury spoke about, one has had his operation. The last I heard, Arran Kemp was recovering from a successful operation at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital. I wish him well in his recovery. The other patient is Mr Kevin

Edmunds. Spinal surgery is conducted at three hospitals in this state, being Royal Perth Hospital, Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital and Princess Margaret Hospital for Children. Royal Perth Hospital has three spinal surgeons, two of whom perform scoliosis surgery. Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital has 4.95 full-time equivalent neurosurgeons. A further surgeon, Mr David Dillon, has been appointed. He will commence work at both Princess Margaret and Royal Perth Hospitals on 17 September. He will review each wait-listed patient with a view to determining surgery dates for those patients. Now that we have increased our capacity, I am sure that matters will flow quickly.