

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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HEALTH CARE

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I did not introduce her at the start, but my wife is also with me here today. If it was she who was clapping for me, I cannot blame her.

I am honoured to take this seat as we wait for our leader, Susan Holt, to join us in this Legislature. She has talked about a spirit of collaboration and cooperation, but at the same time, we do need to ask those tough questions—that is the role of the official opposition—and we want to get answers to those questions.

The first area that I want to touch on today is with respect to the wait list for primary health care providers. In 2021, the then Minister of Health set a goal to reach in six months, but that goal was not met. Then, the government's health reforms of last year set the end of September—last week—for meeting that goal, which was not met. Mr. Speaker, when is the government going to meet that goal? Now members are saying that it will be sometime next year. Are they prepared to tell us today how they expect to meet that goal and what their plan is moving forward?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour to rise in the Legislature and take this question as Minister of Health. I appreciate having this appointment by the Premier so that I can serve the people of New Brunswick in this way. I want to congratulate the interim leader from Moncton Centre on his role. I have been in that chair as well, and I know that it is not an easy task.

Mr. Speaker, what I can tell you about the question that was posed here today is that the work is continuing. The work continues to make sure that the people who are on that wait list do come off it and are connected with a primary caregiver. I can say that the program is rolling out. It started in the southeastern part of the province, and it is going to continue into the central part. A significant number of people have been removed from the wait list and connected with a primary caregiver. That work is going to continue right through that date, and it will be continued until the work is done.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): In the report that our leader issued not too long after she came into her position, one thing that she suggested was to have multidisciplinary care centres. They are also referred to in the government's health reform plan as community care networks. Those would be another way of thinking outside the box to relieve the pressure on ERs and to get people the care that they need. We know that the wait list for primary health care is growing weekly, people are dying in ERs, and ER closures are becoming far too normal—far too normal. We are hearing about them week after week. The ERs that are open are having a very hard time providing timely service.

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Last summer, the Premier suspended the boards and fired the CEO of Horizon to consolidate power in his office. Three months have passed since that day, and we have hardly heard a whiff of the new plan moving forward. What is the Premier's plan with respect to health care now that he has consolidated power in his office?

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, we have a plan. We have a plan, and we are continuing to work on it. We are taking action. That plan—*Stabilizing Health Care: An Urgent Call to Action*—continues. It continues because we are providing access to primary health care. We are providing access to surgery. We are providing a connected system so that people can connect to primary health care providers. We are providing access to addiction and mental health services. We are providing support for seniors to age in place.

Mr. Speaker, I could go on about each one of those items and talk about how well we have moved forward on a number of them, but we know that the health care system is under stress. We know that it is under strain. Every time I get near a microphone, I want to say thank you to the frontline workers who are showing up day in, day out to provide care to New Brunswickers here in New Brunswick. Thank you very much for the work that you do.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, wait lists are getting longer with each passing week. Three months have passed since the restructuring of the Department of Health and the health networks. We know the Premier loves to say that money will not solve the problems in our health care system, but the truth is this: Strategic investments are needed or the crisis will worsen.

The Premier also repeatedly says that he will invest, but he demands results. That is good, Mr. Speaker. However, three months have gone by, and we are not hearing anything about his new strategy. We know that \$40 million in federal funds was unallocated this year. There was \$20 million that went unused in the budget for the Department of Health after the first quarter. This is without mentioning the \$777-million surplus last year.

When will the Premier recognize that investments are needed, especially to tackle recruiting and retention of staff in the health sector?

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time.

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Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the member across the way said that there is nothing new. Well, Mr. Speaker, I was up in the Chaleur region just last week announcing the new clinic. Maybe the member opposite has to catch up on some of these issues. This is a new clinic—a new clinic for services that will be paid for by Medicare. This is a new service to provide cataract procedures for a wait list that had 1 500 people on it. It was taking a year and a half to get that service. Mr. Speaker, that wait-list is now going to be cut in half within a very short number of months, and the wait for a cataract procedure is going to be only three to six months. That is new. That is an investment. That is innovation. That is part of the plan that we are putting through.

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, okay, it would have taken a third Minister of Health to finally implement this program, which we have been awaiting for a long time.

Mr. Speaker, we are not here to criticize; we are here to be constructive. That is exactly what our leader focused on as soon as she became Liberal Party leader. She consulted with professionals and associations in the health care sector. She publicly proposed concrete ideas to improve the health care system. We have tangible suggestions and ideas for the short term, with investments that can help the health care system.

We hope the government will respond positively to our suggestions. Is the Premier ready to implement these measures, which are the direct result of consultations with professionals in the health sector? Is he ready to listen to them?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am really impressed to hear that from the member opposite. I am excited about meeting with the Leader of the Liberal Party later this week and discussing those very items that we can, together, move on quickly. I am hoping that the leader will come forward with suggestions that can be implemented. We will put money where we can get results, just as the minister outlined right there with the results in reducing the wait for cataract surgery. Those are real results that people can feel. That is where we will invest our money, and because our province is doing so well, we have the money to do it. We will put it where it gets results. Thank you very much.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, one of the ideas put forth by the Leader of the Liberal Party was to create an office of health recruitment and retention, with leads from Horizon, Vitalité, and the Department of Health as well as with experienced professional recruiters who know how to land good candidates. This would not only significantly strengthen the province's recruitment efforts but also send a clear message that it is taking this seriously. Other jurisdictions are stepping up with

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effective recruitment strategies. We have to get off the sideline and get into the game. This office could have quarterly data-driven report cards to show where there are vacancies and where you are filling them. This is the sort of transparency that our leader is asking for and that she will implement when she is Premier.

Will the minister consider establishing an office of health recruitment and retention that will collaborate with the health authorities, the department, and professional associations to tackle this serious issue head-on?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that suggestion. I have taken in a lot of suggestions, some solicited and some unsolicited, from many people right across New Brunswick. As a matter of fact, with this department and Vitalité, Horizon, and the medical society, no one is on the sidelines. Everyone is out there recruiting. People are pushing recruitment, retention, and respect for the people in the health care system.

Mr. Speaker, if the member opposite was watching the social media feed from Vitalité, he would have seen that, right now, people are in London recruiting for positions in this system. We do the work. There is no one sitting on the sidelines here. Everyone is in the game, and we are going to continue to play harder. We have bonuses that are being offered for referrals. We are moving forward on reorganizing the recruitment strategy within the department. We are moving ahead. We know that this is a global game, and we are ready to play.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, this office could offer a coordinated effort to go and recruit. We do not know who is recruiting. The former Minister of Health took it over, and then the Premier fired the former Horizon CEO and suspended the boards. Now, people are talking about recruiting overseas. But where is the coordinated effort? That is what this office of health recruitment and retention would offer.

We are hearing far too many stories from parents and from students in the health care field who are having a hard time finding jobs here in our own province. We are hearing that people are going out and recruiting them, but why are we hearing these stories? We should be going out... The Premier should be going out to those colleges and offering guaranteed full-time positions and subsidies for their courses in, certainly, the health care field. Why are people not doing that? Get off their butts and go recruit.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, if there is a name of anybody you know of who is not being employed as a qualified employee by Horizon or Vitalité, I would suggest that you talk to the minister

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directly and provide that name. I am sure that he or the CEO will contact that person and we will deal with it.

With respect to looking at a coordinated effort, the goal was to follow the kind of program that we had for COVID-19 where we work together for the best interests of all New Brunswickers to develop a health care system and a recruitment system that make sense. It is also to develop innovation within our health care network because everybody is competing for personnel with limited resources.

But do you know what, Mr. Speaker? We have a leg up. We have a leg up because we have two health authorities that can deliver for this entire province in both official languages. Nobody else in the country is able to do that. Do you know what? When we put our resources together, and when we work together for better health care in New Brunswick, we can be better than any other province. That is what we are working toward. It is not another bureaucratic process, such as the member suggests, but a system that will actually get results.

[*Translation*]

GOVERNMENT FINANCES

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, last week, the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board published the consolidated financial statements for the province. Once again, we saw an extraordinary deviation from the estimates at the planning stage, with an additional \$300-million surplus, during a time of unprecedented hardship and need for New Brunswickers. Can our minister assure us that, after two years of learning, he has finally changed his methodology when it comes to his budget preparation and estimates for the financial results of the province?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I know that it may come as a shock, but the Fraser Institute recently gave us a B+ in transparency and accountability. We are in the top two, three, or four provinces in the country. So maybe the opposition members should look at the critics from outside the province who are saying: Wow, what is New Brunswick doing?

I cannot help it if our province is on the move with unprecedented growth and unprecedented immigration. You take 810 000... No, it is not—it is 812 000. It is 812 000, Mr. Speaker. That is the highest rate of growth since Confederation. We have a province that is really excelling. Yes, it brings new challenges. It brings challenges in housing, and it brings challenges with inflation.

We have a system where we have to deal with this in an aggressive manner and we have to deal with it, not through the bureaucratic process, but through a decision-making process

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that really makes a difference. That is what we are doing, and that is why I am proud to say... The things, the numbers, and the changes that we are seeing are unprecedented. People are looking to New Brunswick and saying: Wow, what is going on in New Brunswick? Even the members opposite, I am sure, are shocked.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, the Premier has run out of talk about bankers, and now we are talking about institutes. So we are still tone-deaf about the actual people who matter—the New Brunswickers who are looking for some help and for program money.

The minister has often declared himself to be a prudent fiscal manager. I want to hear from the manager about how the fiscal manager is going to improve his predictive models so that we can see less of a gap in results, so that the people responsible for needed programs can start moving the province forward—not on paper but actually forward—and so that people can confidently enact strategies without fear that someone will yank the blanket from them at the last minute. How is this minister going to adapt to the new realities of the present and of the future?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I guess that the member opposite really was not listening. If you look across the country, you will see that New Brunswick rates in the top one, two, or three in relation to accuracy. If you look across the country, you will see wide changes in what was predicted versus what we actually ended up with. We have gone through unprecedented volatility in the past couple of years, and we will continue to do some of that as we try to deal with inflationary issues and try to deal with the energy costs that are part of the federal policy. We will have to react to those, and we are reacting to them.

The point I am raising is that we are in a position, through a province that has had unprecedented growth, to be economically prudent but also economically capable of delivering better results for every citizen and particularly for dealing with those who need it the most. You will hear announcements from the Social Development Minister about what we are changing for housing and about what we have already done in the way of the child welfare Act, in the way of human services, and in the way of not clawing back money. Mr. Speaker, we have only just begun.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, Premier.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, we are \$1 billion off on a prediction, and we are talking about where we are in the standings, where we rank. Honestly, it is something to talk about.

We have an opportunity to make meaningful change in New Brunswick to prepare this province for the future, but it is going to take some trust and a belief that if we invest in New Brunswickers, it will pay off and we will all prosper. But the minister has publicly

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stated that he will not change his fiscal philosophy, and he has demonstrated over and over again that he is not updating his process or his methodology. If that is the case, how can he now say that he will finally get funding to the needed programs? To borrow a favourite saying of the Minister of Natural Resources, doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result is lunacy. How can we take any comfort that this minister will finally get the job accomplished now?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that we should have great confidence that the job is being done. We have the lowest unemployment rate in the history of New Brunswick—in our history. We have a program to raise the minimum wage. We did it directly for two years, but in this coming year, with the inflationary rates, it will be a 5% or 6% increase. Success may be hard to define in the Liberals' portfolio because the only success that they know is how much money they can spend and how many taxes they can increase. It is a hard thing to fathom when we can reduce taxes, spend more, and still have an economy that is on fire. That is a winning formula.

At the beginning, we said that we would rebuild the province and make “New Brunswick, the place to be” more than just a slogan—a reality—and that is exactly what is happening in New Brunswick. The reality is that people are coming here for the first time and saying: Wow, what a secret this has been. As we roll out programs that will get results, just as the minister talks about for cataract surgery, that is what you will see more of.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, Premier.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, today, we will have a chance to review the latest bill that the government will introduce on its local government reform. We are hopeful that it clears up many unanswered questions, but there will likely be many others. We are very skeptical that it will. When can the regional service commissions, the local governments, and the rural districts expect to receive the final financial information on what they will be receiving to assist with the burden of all the additional costs that they will be facing? Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is an honour for me to answer the question from my new critic in the opposition shadow cabinet.

As you know, we have undertaken a reform. People have been waiting over 25 years for this reform. In our white paper, there are four pillars: structure, regional collaboration, and

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land use planning. I will be introducing a bill in the House today, Mr. Speaker. This bill aims to help municipalities in New Brunswick.

As you know, the finances pillar was very important. Today, we are going to propose a new formula that aims to help municipalities. We want the process to be more transparent, simple, stable, and predictable. I am looking forward to introducing my bill after question period. Thank you very much.

Mr. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, this government has just announced another record surplus—\$777 million this time. We know that it will be extremely difficult for these new local governments to absorb the costs of the services the government is offloading. They will also have to deal with costs related to inflation and salary increases. Given the enormous surplus, will the minister increase the amount of money provided to local governments to help them out through equalization grants?

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, in response to what the member for Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé said, I would like to put the record straight, because he is telling untruths. There has been no offloading of services. The mandates of regional service commissions were expanded; that has been done. At the municipal level, communities have already been taking care of tourism and economic development. We want to be partners. You will see today, after the bill has been tabled, that we will be even closer partners with the new formula. We believe in the municipalities.

However, on the other side of the House, we have seen absolutely no... The new leader has ideas, but there are never any costs associated with her ideas. That is the problem with opposition members. We do not choose to work with the opposition. We choose New Brunswickers, municipalities, and associations to ensure that we have a plan for New Brunswick. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, nurses and doctors are burning out in our emergency departments while trying to hold a crumbling health system together. Is that success? I do not think so. Staff shortages are putting patients at risk. Is that success? No. One of my constituents died in the ER waiting room at the Chalmers hospital this summer—someone I knew well. Just the other week, another constituent's father who had dementia and was suffering from pneumonia was stuck in the ER for six days—in a hall where the treatment needed to remove fluid from his lungs could not be administered. A doctor just told me recently that working in the hospital today is like working in a war zone—a war zone.



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Will the Premier direct the Minister of Health to require the health authorities to immediately set up urgent care centres to relieve the tremendous pressure on our ERs and give all patients a shot at getting well?

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It does cause us pain when we hear of the sad stories that the member opposite talks about. Obviously, our sympathy goes out to the family members involved in any of these tragic situations.

Mr. Speaker, that is why we are taking action. That is why we have a plan. That is why we have a plan to connect people to primary care providers, whether it is through eVisitNB, which takes people away from emergency rooms, or whether it is through a portable X-ray machine that goes around and prevents seniors from having to go to the emergency room to get an X-ray for a wrist, an ankle, or even a hip. That diverts people away from the emergency room. It is why we are moving forward with having EMTs educated, and they are expected to be in the ambulances by the end of this year. That allows paramedics to go out and provide services to people in their homes when they dial 911.

Mr. Speaker, making sure that those emergency rooms can function well is a directive that we have given to the CEOs...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

[Translation]

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, on August 10, Dr. Yogi Sehgal sent the Premier a series of ideas to help resolve the current health care crisis. Among other things, he recommended that primary health care clinics be created to assess non-urgent patients. These are all patients who do not have family physicians or who cannot see them on short notice. Emergency rooms are created for urgent cases and should not be tasked with practicing family medicine. With the projected surplus, will the Premier see to it that the health networks have the funds required to open health care clinics?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Yes, indeed, we will make sure that the money is there to fund clinics that are necessary and to ensure that ERs are not used for anything less or anything more than an emergency. We need to unload ERs with care, but when people show up at an ER, as they do today because they have nowhere else to go, you need to have a place that you can send them so that they can have an appointment and walk right in that night or the next morning.



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The idea is absolutely... As the Leader of the Green Party would say, our goal is on a clinical care model in primary care because doctors do not want to work the same hours as they used to work. They want to work in collaborative care. That collaborative care model could be available all over the province in different communities. Mr. Speaker, that is the direction. It is the direction, because you need to find ways that bring people here to work using not the same model but a new model. A work-life balance is a program that applies to every profession. We need to make it affordable for people but available to people, and we will do what is necessary to do just that.

ASSESSMENTS

Mr. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Mr. Speaker, many homeowners are going to be shocked by the huge increases in assessments that will drive up their taxes. The minister suggested that this is a windfall for the municipalities so they should lower their tax rates. The minister is trying to pass the buck. Government is in a position to do something about it across the board. Will the minister commit to introducing legislative amendments to reduce the property tax to offset unreasonable assessment increases?

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we know, there is good news in New Brunswick. The population of New Brunswick has increased by 2.7%. We have hit a high of 812 000 people. The Shawn Graham government wanted 800 000. We did it in 2022, four years before... By the way, we are getting a lot younger. The average age of New Brunswickers is going from 47 to 46 years old. That is another plus. Mr. Speaker, yes, there are pressures. There are pressures. There is a real estate boom. Again, Service New Brunswick has the mechanisms to take care of New Brunswickers. When the opposition members pass the buck like that, they should go see their federal friends. Thank you.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, in yesterday's first recommendations report, the Child and Youth Advocate indicated that he found serious deficiencies with regard to planning and any long-term strategy in several key areas such as human resource recruitment and mental health training. The expectation of the government is that it will put in place a credible recruitment plan to attract mental health professionals and to provide training to consider youth mental health issues in emergency responses with a more child-friendly and culturally sensitive approach.

We need to see a sense of urgency and a shift in the government's mindset when it comes to mental health. Most important, the government needs to be transparent about what it takes to have the system that we need. Mr. Speaker, I ask the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour this: What is his action plan to develop the human resources that the province and the system require to tackle mental health?



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Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): I am going to take that, Mr. Speaker, because on a lot of the items that were mentioned by the member across the way, I have actually been working with my colleague the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour in making the announcements to do just that, to recruit. There have been some very good responses. There have been some very good examples. The other day, we announced new navigators to help people who are medically trained in other jurisdictions to come to New Brunswick and get through the maze to get their credentials approved so that they can go to work, whether it is in mental health or in other areas. Mr. Speaker, we have also expedited the ability for RNs from France to come to New Brunswick and have their credentials realized so that they can go into the health care system and work.

Mr. Speaker, we received the report from Mr. Lamrock. Our department actually works very, very closely with the Child and Youth Advocate. I must say that when it comes to the mental health response specifically, there have been an additional 7.5 FTEs hired who are able to...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, timely access to care is essential and vital when dealing with mental health. There need to be enough professionals available so that children and young adults can be seen promptly and can have proper responses so that treatment can be provided. This means more clinical psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists, and counsellors and better training for our frontline workers.

The government should be working hand-in-hand with postsecondary institutions to identify gaps and shortages in the number of mental health professionals, to develop a specific recruitment plan, and to offer incentives to attract new students. As much as this government likes to cut programs, in this case, austerity is not an option. So, I ask the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour again whether he is willing to work with universities and colleges to set targets, provide funding, and develop a credible plan to deal with the urgency of mental health.

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. That is exactly what we have been doing with universities over the past number of years—developing credible plans. In fact, for that matter, not that long ago, the former Minister of Health and I were up at UNB introducing a new program for mental health specialists in nursing. I think that our track record speaks for itself.

Just a few minutes ago, the Minister of Health talked about the navigator program that we put in place for nursing recruitment. Where before we were not even scratching the surface when it came to international nurse recruitment—we were doing fewer than 5 a year—now, we have attracted more than 200 internationally trained nurses over the past number



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of years. So, I take the member opposite's point very seriously. We have been talking to universities. And what I will say is that we not only want to set targets. We also want to make sure that the contracts we have with our universities are performance-based and that we are actually getting the results that we need and not shovelling money out the door, as the previous government did with nursing.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister. The time for question period has expired.

