



**Senator the Hon Fiona Nash**

**Assistant Minister for Health**

**Senator for New South Wales**

**Deputy Leader of the Nationals in the Senate**

RECEIVED

13 AUG 2015

PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Ref No: MC15-012174

Dr Dennis Jensen MP  
 Standing Committee on Petitions  
 Parliament House  
 PO Box 6021  
 CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Dr Jensen

Thank you for your representations of 25 June 2015 seeking a response to a petition that has been submitted to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions regarding access to GP services in Bassendean, Western Australia.

The petition presents the view that Bassendean does not have enough local private GPs, and seeks district of workforce shortage (DWS) status for Bassendean or that I grant Dr Stephen Wilson special approval to employ overseas trained GPs with unrestricted Medicare access at his practice, Bassendean Total Health Care.

I offer the following response to this petition.

Inner metropolitan areas of major cities, like Bassendean, are excluded from DWS status by legislative guidelines. This recognises that inner metropolitan areas of major cities have access to more GPs, medical specialists and allied health providers than other areas of Australia, and have access to more major health facilities, such as hospitals and health services, as well as public transport infrastructure to allow people to more easily travel around the city.

The DWS legislative guidelines support the operation of section 19AB of the *Health Insurance Act 1973* (the Act). Section 19AB prevents any overseas trained doctor from accessing the Medicare benefits arrangements for a period of time after they first register to practice as a doctor in Australia (usually 10 years).

This allows overseas trained doctors to be more effectively encouraged to practice in those areas of Australia that experience the most acute medical workforce shortages. Despite the operation of section 19AB, Medicare provider numbers can be allocated to an overseas trained doctor to provide services in a DWS location. This is an important medical workforce distribution mechanism, as the government has no ability to otherwise direct doctors in private practice to work in particular locations.

Many communities across Australia feel that they should have greater access to doctors and medical services. However, it is my responsibility as Assistant Minister for Health to consider medical workforce shortages at a national level.

By far the greatest shortages of doctors occur in rural and remote regions of Australia. Special exceptions for relatively well-serviced inner metropolitan areas reduce the number of doctors who would otherwise be required to practice in a DWS, including in rural and remote communities.

For this reason, there is no discretionary power to allow Bassendean to be declared a DWS.

The petition also requests that I use the discretionary powers of section 6 of the legislative guidelines to give Dr Wilson special approval to employ overseas trained doctors with unrestricted Medicare access.

I should clarify that the Government is in no way responsible for approving employment of doctors in private practice, and it is not possible for the Government to examine whether any other issues, such as employment conditions, may be affecting the ability of a particular practice to recruit a doctor.

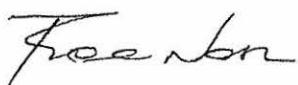
The legislative guidelines do not include any provision that allows a vacant medical position to be declared a DWS, or for any enforceable decision to be made outside of the normal Medicare provider number application process. Provider numbers are not issued to practices or employers, but to suitably qualified medical professionals who are registered to practice by the independent Medical Board of Australia, and otherwise meet the requirements of the Act.

While I understand the concerns of the Bassendean community, there are other areas of Australia that continue to experience less access to medical services.

The Government has previously responded to representations about the level of access to GPs in Bassendean. These responses have included detailed advice about the options that are available to local medical practices, including Dr Wilson, for recruiting appropriately qualified GPs. This includes opportunities for Dr Wilson to employ overseas trained doctors to provide after hours services in Bassendean, as all areas of Australia are considered DWS for medical services provided in the after hours period.

Thank you for raising this matter.

Yours sincerely



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9 JUL 2015