

Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH PORTFOLIO

Additional Estimates 2014 - 2015, 25 February 2015

Ref No: SQ15-000141

OUTCOME: 3 - Access to Medical and Dental Services

Topic: Proton Therapy

Type of Question: Written Question on Notice

Senator: Xenophon, Nick

Question:

1. I am told from experts in the field that it costs the Australian Government US\$250,000 per patient per course of proton therapy in Boston, and this cost is not inclusive of flights, accommodation, and any additional scans or surgery needed by patients. Of this amount, what is the current cost to the Government for patients having proton therapy?
2. Are you aware of the current number of patients in Australia who currently qualify for proton therapy, and of that number, what percentage is accessing it?
3. What is the current lag time in accessing funding from the Department towards a course of proton therapy?
4. Does the Government currently provide medical support costs towards the long-haul travel to the USA and Europe to access proton therapy?
5. Does the Department know of any arrangements currently in place for patients who return from overseas and require follow-up treatment?
6. Are you aware of how patients who qualify for proton therapy treatment are triaged?
7. What is the long-term strategy for cancer patients in Australia for which proton radiotherapy is the only/best option?
8. With proton therapy not currently available anywhere in the southern hemisphere, have you commissioned costings for a proton therapy facility in Australia, and what were the overall figures?
9. Do you believe that we in Australia have the skillset to build a proton therapy facility in Australia?
10. What is the difference between a nationally funded proton facility versus a privately operated cancer shop?
11. A national centre would require integration with other a comprehensive cancer service who have proven expertise in delivering cancer care to rural and remote patient to ensure equality in service provision. To your knowledge are there any cancer centres in Australia with this expertise, and where are they?

12. A recent article on ABC News (11 February 2015) detailed of a PWC commissioned report which predicts that Australia will have lost its position within the top 20 economies by 2050 to developing countries such as Bangladesh, unless Australia moves away from dependence on mining and invest more in Science and technology. Is there any urgency or push from the Government or Department to accelerate projects such as a proton therapy facility in Australia as a result of report such as these?

Answer:

1. Over the last three years, the Medical Treatment Overseas (MTO) Programme has funded 11 patients to obtain proton beam radiotherapy at various centres overseas at a total cost of \$AUD1,211,869. This equates to an average cost of around \$AUD110,170 per patient.
2. No.
3. The MTO Programme applications are generally assessed within six weeks from receipt of a completed application.
4. Yes. Approved applicants receive financial assistance for medical and hospital costs, flights, accommodation and other eligible incidental costs (such as visa and passport fees and travel insurance). When medically necessary, the travel costs of a carer are also covered.
5. Follow-up care for patients is available in the Australian health setting and overseas hospitals facilitate the transition of care for patients to their usual physician in Australia.
6. Australian treating physicians are responsible for referring patients, when clinically appropriate, for proton beam radiotherapy overseas and must support applications for financial assistance under the MTO Programme.

A panel of Departmental Medical Advisers assess applications, in conjunction with independent expert advice obtained from relevant medical specialist groups, against the MTO Programme Guidelines and four mandatory medical eligibility criteria.

7. The radiation oncology profession and industry provide advice to the Australian Government on the long-term strategy for Australian cancer patients (including patients who may possibly benefit from proton beam radiotherapy).

The Government provides funding for cancer treatments in Australia based on an independent assessment of safety, clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness by the Medical Services Advisory Committee, which is an independent expert advisory committee.

Cancer patients who meet the criteria for financial assistance under the MTO Programme for proton beam radiotherapy will continue to access this treatment at overseas centres.

8. No.
9. The Department of Health is not in a position to comment on whether the required skillset exists in Australia to build a proton facility.

10. The term 'cancer shop' is not known to the Department.
11. There are no cancer centres that currently provide access to proton beam radiotherapy to patients in Australia.
12. Science and technology investment and industry policy are the responsibility of other Australian Government portfolios including the Department of Industry and Science.