

QUESTION TAKEN ON NOTICE

BUDGET ESTIMATES HEARING: 22 May 2007

IMMIGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP PORTFOLIO

(128) Output 2.2: Translating and Interpreting Services

Senator Hurley (L&CA 50) asked:

In relation to the Doctors Priority Line, you mentioned earlier that doctors might be given an alternative day if management dictates that. Is it possible to give any figures on how often that happens? Alternatively, provide a sample of a particular day and perhaps a quarterly figure throughout the year and as we get towards the end of the year

Answer:

The Doctors Priority Line is a DIAC initiative to assist medical practitioners to access fee free telephone interpreting services. The priority line is available for use by private medical practitioners providing services that are claimable under Medicare and provided to Australian citizens and permanent residents. There is no limit on the number of these fee free telephone services available to medical practitioners.

Fee free on-site interpreting services are also available to medical practitioners. There is a daily limit on the numbers of services provided in each state and territory. This daily limit is applied due to the resource-intensive nature of on-site interpreting. This limit maximises the availability of interpreters to clients, including medical practitioners, particularly in languages in short supply. There are no limitations for telephone interpreting.

In relation to arranging an alternative day where the daily limit for a particular day has been reached, the Department's letter of 8 June 2007 corrects evidence provided to the Committee on 22 May 2007 regarding the re-scheduling of fee free interpreting assignments for medical practitioners. This letter states "As a general rule, TIS National requests the medical practitioner to re-schedule when the quota has been exhausted for the date of their request. This message is conveyed by fax to the medical practice. Assistance is not provided over the telephone with re-scheduling dates for interpreting assignments because of the probability of the re-scheduled date not being available to the medical practitioner/patient, or because the interpreter may take another assignment before a confirmed request is received from the medical practitioner."

TIS National investigated the number of occasions where medical practitioners were advised of an inability to provide fee free on-site interpreters during May 2007. There were 458 occasions where TIS was not able to provide a fee free service to medical practitioners. There are three categories of inability to provide services relevant to the question and the number of occasions TIS was not able to provide a service is listed against each category:

- 1) fee free quota exceeded (304);
- 2) no interpreters available at the time requested (130), and
- 3) requested interpreter not available (24).

On these occasions, TIS suggested to the medical practitioner to re-schedule or use telephone interpreting as an alternative. Overall TIS National provided 1550 fee free on-site services to medical practitioners in May 2007.