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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
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RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

WEDNESDAY, 9 NOVEMBER 2011

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Forestry.

Sea Lettuce Pilot Program (further)

Ms. Sherry: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Yesterday on the floor of the Legislature the Member from Tignish-Palmer Road had asked me to table the report in regards to the pilot project for sea lettuce that took place in Mill River and Stanhope. I would just like to advise the member that the report will not be complete until December, and at that time that document will certainly be public.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Convention centre conference date (further)

Mr. Henderson: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Yesterday in the House the Member from Stratford-Kinlock asked me a question regarding convention bookings at the proposed new convention centre.

The department of tourism is not responsible for handling bookings on this or any other facility. Our department does support conventions and meetings sector within our province, and we work to promote that PEI is a tremendous location to host a convention or a meeting. However, though, our department is not responsible for the day-to-day operations of the convention industry itself.

But I can assure the hon. member on the other side, and all those in the House today, that our department will work with the industry to ensure that all conventions are accommodated here in Prince Edward Island. It's a wonderful place to host a convention.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Catastrophic drug program

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

There's over 25% of Islanders that have no drug coverage. The Minister of Health and Wellness and the Premier actually made a commitment in 2009 to modernize the provincial drug plan.

My question to the Premier: Will your government now implement a catastrophic drug program for the province?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

We were very excited when we had the privilege to form government in 2007, where we were able to make numerous investments in our drug coverage here in the Province of Prince Edward Island. At the time we wanted to work with the federal government on a catastrophic drug program. There was talk of that for numerous years, and we're still hoping that under the health accord of 2014, that hopefully there will be an opportunity then to introduce the catastrophic drug program.

It is important to note that there is a high cost drug program in the Province of Prince Edward Island, which would be similar in scope in some aspects to a catastrophic drug program in other provinces.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

About 35,000 people, if they decided to go out to a restaurant in PEI tonight, every one of them, and they walked in the door and they took a look at a menu, and there were all great items listed on the menu but they

had absolutely no money, they wouldn't be able to access anything in that restaurant. That's the way it is for people that are struggling to pay drugs in PEI, 37,000 Islanders without any type of drug coverage.

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct).

Leader of the Opposition: The question to the Premier: Premier, will you implement a catastrophic drug program for those people?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

It's important for the Leader of the Opposition to note that she's talking about two different things. She's talking about drug coverage in the province for those that may not have drug programs. A catastrophic drug program is something entirely different.

But we'll continue to work on it. I'm very excited that when we did have the privilege to form government in 2007 we made numerous investments around drug coverage, and as long as we have the privilege to be able to form the Government of Prince Edward Island, we'll make sure that we make it one of our main priorities.

Thank you very much.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

New Brunswick and PEI are the last two provinces to implement a catastrophic drug program. But in New Brunswick they're actually in the process to do that now.

Premier, will you follow the lead of New Brunswick and finally implement a catastrophic drug program so all Islanders are able to access the medications they need?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

It's important to note a catastrophic drug program is provided for high cost drugs where people would have trouble affording them. Then a portion of their income would be used to be able to allow it to make it more affordable for them. That's what a catastrophic drug program is.

The drug coverage that the Leader of the Opposition is talking about is drug coverage on a general basis, similar to what we have with seniors in the Province of Prince Edward Island. So there are two different things that she's talking about there.

Obviously, there is a review that's taking place. We do have a very complicated drug program here in the Province of Prince Edward Island. It's developed over the last 25 or 30 years and we are working to help deliver on a more coherent drug program to Islanders.

But it's also important to note that since we had the privilege of forming government in 2007, we have added numerous new drugs to the formulary and millions of more dollars in drug coverage in the Province of Prince Edward Island.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

There are so many Islanders, like one of my own constituents, who received a letter from Health PEI when he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, that no drug coverage was there for him or his family. Can you imagine he has to deal with that? Again, just like many other Islanders who have no access to drug coverage.

My question to the Premier: Would you please stop playing with politics? Islanders want to see action on this file. From the cancer society, to the arthritis society, to the Alzheimer's group, people need to be able to access their medications.

Premier, will you finally implement a catastrophic drug program to cover all Islanders?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

I hope the Leader of the Opposition does a little research with regards to drug coverage so she understands the difference between catastrophic drug program and drug programs.

But the Leader of the Opposition is correct on this issue. It is an issue that, again, similar to yesterday, tugs at individuals' hearts. As a government you want to be able to provide the best possible coverage to each and every Islander. As a government we have balances out there that we have to maintain with regards to our spending.

But as a government, we've made it a priority around health care, around drug coverage, in the Province of Prince Edward Island. We wish we could provide everything to everyone. But even if you go out to a province like Alberta that their fiscal capacity would be three or four times what ours is here in the Province of Prince Edward Island, you would discover that they also have issues as well.

So we'll just work with those groups out there that the Leader of the Opposition mentioned. We'll try to do the best we can, Madam Speaker, and we'll make sure that it does remain a priority here in the Province of Prince Edward Island.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

There are 37,000 Islanders with no drug coverage, and the Premier often talks about what you're able to afford. Well, we can't afford not to cover these people. You can imagine if there's a person out there with high blood pressure. Pharmacists every day see people come in who are not able to afford their medications. If that person stops taking their medication for high blood pressure, you know and we know that they're headed towards a stroke, which is a lot more expensive on health care coverage providing services in a hospital.

My question to the Premier: Premier, will you finally sit down and implement a program for the province?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much.

I'm glad the Leader of the Opposition is asking the correct questions now. That is exactly what we are trying to do. We're taking the formula that is now in place that has numerous different aspects to it, we're finding out what works, what doesn't. We're taking a pot of money that we have and we'll disburse it in the best possible manner to help out as many people as we can.

That's what responsible governments do. It will remain a priority for our government and we'll continue to do the best job that we can.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

A question to the Premier: What's taking so long? Your government has been working with these groups for well over four years. What is taking so long? Islanders are going without. They're making choices whether they can purchase medication or pay for their heating oil. You had dollars to pay for a luxury hotel, why not a catastrophic drug program for the province?

My question to the Premier: When will you set a real priority in health and implement a catastrophic drug program for all Islanders?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Leader of the Opposition, being a career bureaucrat for 25 years, would know the difference between loaning dollars and operational dollars. Obviously it comes from different pots. She would know that the IIDI money that comes from Ottawa is immigrant money that has to be loaned out to businesses. So the premise of her question is

totally off and she should know that before she asks a question.

But what we're going to do as a government is continue to do what we've been doing over the last four and a half years, and that's making sure that health care and drug coverage remain our number one priority in the Province of Prince Edward Island. We've made some significant investments. Yes, there is more to be done and we'll continue to work with all stakeholders, Madam Speaker, to offer the best possible programs to all Islanders.

Thank you very much.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

There are people across PEI in all 27 districts. Perhaps someone is dealing with arthritis and can't afford their medications. So what happens? They stay home. After a while they can't go to work. That's a cost to the province, not to mention to the person's quality of life.

Premier, when are you going to understand that if you truly invest in a provincial drug program that covers everybody, you will not only increase the quality of life for Islanders, help keep people employed, but you'll also save those health dollars? You talk and talk about health being a priority. Let's see action on this file. Implement a catastrophic drug program for the entire province.

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

It has been a priority, and that's why we've added over 100 drugs to the formulary, why we've increased the budget by millions of dollars – perhaps one of the largest increases over a four-year period in the province's history – and that's why it will remain a priority for our government.

The Leader of the Opposition raises some interesting points. But as she knows, within government the dollars are not endless. You need to prioritize your spending. The area

that she's talking about is our number one priority and that's why we've seen some significant investments over the last four years. As long as there are dollars available that's where increases in spending will go for the foreseeable future.

Thank you very much.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Right now there are 25 different drug programs across PEI. What Islanders constantly tell us is they have to go see one person here, one person there, and in the end may discover they're not eligible for anything. There are 37,000 Islanders without drug coverage. Sometime I actually agree with the Premier. The Premier says sometimes that we live in the best province in Canada and I would agree on that.

But we have a two-tiered system in this province whereby there are those that can afford life saving and critical medication and those that can't because they have to pay their mortgage or their rent or their food.

Premier, will you finally stop blaming the federal government, will you stop constantly putting this off till the future, and will you do something truly for all Islanders and implement, once and for all, a catastrophic drug program that covers absolutely everyone, including the 37,000 Islanders with no drug coverage?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Again, there is a difference between a catastrophic drug program and a drug program for each and every Islander. But I can assure the Leader of the Opposition that as a government this is a major priority for us.

She talks about the 25 different programs out there, there are at least 25 different programs out there. Right now we are in the process of looking at finding a better way to deliver our drug formulary here in the

Province of Prince Edward Island. But it's also important to note that there are areas where we are a leader in the country.

Our coverage for seniors around our drug formulary is perhaps the best in the country. We were also able to provide over the last number of years help for insulin dependent Islanders with diabetic strips. There's a lot of different areas where we made some significant investments and over the next four years, Madam Speaker, hopefully we'll have an opportunity to be able to implement new changes and new investments with regards to a provincial drug formulary.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock.

QEH ER wait time

Mr. Aylward: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question to the Premier. Premier, I'm continuing to hear over and over again complaints about the long waits at the QEH emergency room. You've had four years to address the situation but it's only getting worse under this government's mandate.

Why are you not doing something to address this critical situation, Mr. Premier?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much.

I think that emergency rooms in Canada are all going through the same issues. We are doing a lot to address it. There are more walk-in clinics now in the Province of Prince Edward Island. There are more updates when you arrive at your emergency room, where you can see how long your wait's going to be.

Part of the big thing that we're going to be going forward into the future is going to be educating Islanders, to let them know that emergency rooms are for emergencies. Too often there are people that go to an emergency room without an emergency. That's why it's important that we update Islanders. I understand that there are new boards out at the QEH emergency department that update people with regards

to their acuity of the illness that they're coming in with in relation to how long they are going to have to wait.

It's always going to be challenge, but as a government we'll continue to make major investments. The investments that we've made for the new emergency department, the investments we've made with increase in the family doctor complement in the Province of Prince Edward Island, with more walk-in clinics to deal with the issues that should not be going to the emergency room, and I'm confident that as we move in to the future we'll see improvements there as we go forward. There are always going to be changes, there are always going to be investments to be made, and our government will make sure that it's a priority.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock.

Mr. Aylward: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Premier, I've recently heard from a mother whose young child had broken his wrist. They waited 16 long and painful hours to see a physician at the emergency room. Premier, is this an acceptable amount of time to you, and is this your government's vision of quality health care for Islanders?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: I hear stories such as that every single day. There are some people where I hear stories where they show up at the emergency department, where they have a pain in their chest, they're in within 10 minutes, they're seeing a specialist, and a week later, they're under the knife and they're getting the coverage that they need to be able to live out the rest of their lives.

It comes down to priorities. I'm not a physician. The Member from Stratford-Kinlock isn't a physician. If there are doctors out there, I'm sure that they're making the call. If you or perhaps one in your family's going in there with a heart attack or with a life-threatening, they're going to be brought in before someone with a broken wrist.

Do I wish that they could get in earlier? I do. But it's what we're offering here in the Province of Prince Edward Island that if it comes down to your acuity level – if it's an absolute emergency, you're getting in right away. What happens is those other people get bumped along the way. Some days you may go in and someone with a broken wrist may get in within an hour or two. Some days it may take longer. It all depends on what they're dealing with at the emergency department on that given day.

Do I like the fact that someone waited 16 hours? Absolutely not. Do I want to see that improved? Yes, I do, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock.

QEH staffing

Mr. Aylward: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Premier, the QEH will be a beautiful state-of-the-art facility when it is completed, but unfortunately it needs people to work in it to care for patients. Explain to Prince Edward Islanders why you have failed to address the issue of staffing at this facility.

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: I don't think we have. It's something that we're working on on a regular basis and we're looking forward to recruiting in the professionals that we need.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock.

Increased funding for health professionals

Mr. Aylward: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Another question for the Premier: Premier, physician shortages and nursing shortages appear to be the root cause of why so many of our ERs are closed. Our walk-in clinics are being shut down, yet you eliminated 51 vacant RN positions, and there is a shortage of LPNs as well. Premier, will you commit today to increasing funding to ensure that this province has an adequate complement of physicians, nurses, LPNs to provide adequate health care for all Islanders?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much. That is exactly what we are doing. That is why we have more physicians practicing in the Province of Prince Edward Island than ever before. That is why we changed the scope of practice so that our LPNs could do more work in the system. That is why there are openings for RN positions. When the opposition claims, just as you did, that there's 51 cut, if there's 51 cut, how can there be openings? You can't have it both ways, Madam Speaker.

As a government, it's a major priority for us. We've introduced a residency program to bring in more young physicians to the Province of Prince Edward Island. We've added the accelerated nursing program out at the University of Prince Edward Island. We've brought in a new school of nursing building out at the university. We've provided more scope of practice for our LPNs. We are making this the number one priority, and it's important to note that health care is changing across the province. It will continuously evolve, and there are more walk-in clinics available than ever before here in the Province of Prince Edward Island.

There are going to be changes to our emergency rooms such as we're seeing as when the previous government shut down the one in the Souris area or why there's not nighttime coverage now in the Montague area. All these things are changing or why – there's one hospital in the west now that has emergency coverage. All these things take place. You got to remember, 25 years ago there were babies being delivered in hospitals all over the province. Now it's only done in the two main referral hospitals.

Health care's going to continue to evolve and as a government, we're going to make sure that it's our number one priority.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock.

Mr. Aylward: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Premier, you keep telling Islanders that we have the highest physician complement ever, yet almost daily there is some service that is not being delivered because of physician

shortages or nursing shortages. You say that in your own press releases announcing these closures.

This is not acceptable, Premier, and Islanders want some answers. What are you going to tell them?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: I'm going to tell them that we do have the highest complement ever, that yes, there are improvements to be made, but let's look at the improvements that we've made over the last four years. When it comes to family physicians in the province, I believe we're somewhere around 96 or in the high 90s with regards to family physicians. There are issues out there, Madam Speaker, with regard to the differences that are taking place around fee for service, around contract, around salary.

As a government we're working with the Medical Society of Prince Edward Island, we're working with the physicians in the Province of Prince Edward Island, to make sure that as many Islanders as possible – we heard yesterday 96% of Islanders have access to a family physician. Is that good enough? No it's not. I want to be higher than that. It is the tops in the country, Madam Speaker, but there are improvements to be made and I want to offer those improvements.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock.

Mr. Aylward: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Premier, your government has spent millions on bricks and mortar, announcing new health care clinics across this province, and I applaud your government for this. But what is the good of a health clinic if it is closed due to staffing shortages? It doesn't make sense. Premier, tell Islanders today what you plan to do to deal with this critical situation in our province.

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much.

The same as we've been doing over the last four years, and that is making sure health care is our number one priority, Madam Speaker.

We need to make sure that we have access to primary care. That is why the health centres that the hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock just mentioned are so vital. We want to get people out of going to the emergency room. We want them to go to their local health care providers across the province so that they can get the best possible care. We want to work more on preventative measures in health care to make sure that Islanders are healthier on a daily basis so that they do not have to go to their physician as much. These are the changes that we're trying to make and we'll continue to implement them over the next four years.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road.

Tignish health centre funding

Mr. Perry: Madam Speaker.

In the spring of this year, the residents of Tignish and surrounding areas requested from this government a \$50,000 operating grant for the Tignish Co-Operative Health Centre. It wasn't until this recent election campaign that the Premier said the government would fulfill this request and would provide the funding that they requested. Half of it immediately and the other half in the spring of 2012.

Premier, will your government commit to fulfilling their promise to provide half of the funding immediately and the remaining in the spring of 2012?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much.

As we move forward into our budget process, we realize that that is one of the commitments we've made, and we'll be addressing it like every other commitment.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road.

Mr. Perry: Madam Speaker, this was stated, a campaign promise from the Premier.

However, unlike other campaign promises, the commitment did not appear in the Liberal Party policy platform. Premier, can you tell us why this is the case?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

There's a lot of commitments that are made throughout the campaign. I'm pretty sure it was in a press release that we put out. Perhaps the hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road should do a little better research. But it is a commitment. If I'm saying we made the commitment, then we did. So we'll deal with that in the budget process leading up till April of next year, Madam Speaker, and hopefully we'll be able to see it in the budget.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road.

Mr. Perry: Madam Speaker, I did read their policy platform and it wasn't in it.

Premier, there is much speculation that this was a promise made in the 11th hour and now many residents fear that that this funding will not come at all. Can you offer the House, in writing, your commitment to the Tignish Co-Operative Health Centre to provide the \$50,000 operating grant?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much. Like every commitment that we make, Madam Speaker, we'll be dealing with that when we do the budget process starting in the new year. The hon. member can wait until April when the budget comes down.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road.

Mr. Perry: Madam Speaker, the Premier promised the people of Tignish and area half of that operating cost immediately and the other half in the spring of 2012.

So is he going back on his promises? This centre is vital to the community and it's the only health centre on PEI that does not receive any government support. We are so grateful to the community for fundraising for the centre to keep it going. However, to be sustained, it needs the support of the government on an annual basis like every other health centre on PEI.

To the Premier: Will your government support the health care needs of West Prince and commit to providing the \$50,000 operating grant for the Tignish Co-operative Health Centre on an annual basis?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much. Again, there will be a budget process coming up starting in the new year. I'm sure the minister of finance will be going through the policy platform and will also be meeting with local communities, and I'm sure that this will be discussed coming up as we prepare for the April budget. The Member from Tignish-Palmer Road will have to wait for that budget.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Lewis Point.

Adults with autism

Ms. Casey: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

My question today is for the Minister of Community Services, Seniors and Labour.

During the recent election campaign I spoke to a number of constituents who have adult children living with autism. They have voiced their concerns to me about the supports available through the province for these young adults.

Minister, would you kindly update the House on what supports are available for adults living with autism?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Community Services, Seniors and Labour.

Ms. Docherty: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I can only imagine as a parent myself what it must be like for parents, particularly aging parents, who have sons or daughters with any disability, whether it's autism or any other. I'm sure it is an extreme worry for them as to what's going to happen in their adult years.

In respect to autism, our government has partnered with the Stars for Life, and we have assisted them in the building of an absolutely beautiful home, a resource centre, and it is my hope that families will be able to use that resource centre as a tool in order to sort of work through any issues or concerns that they may have with their adult children. As well, as I understand it they do have respite rooms there which will also allow the families to get a break, and where these sons or daughters can come for a short period of time.

The Stars for Life is a wonderful organization but it's only one organization. We have the Community Connections and we also have Tremploy. Those are opportunities.

But I guess what I'd like to say is that my department is not there solely for a specific disability. We are there to work with families who have sons or daughters that have multiple different disabilities.

Having said all that, I guess when I think about education in the early childhood department and their autism strategy, I do kind of hope that as that progresses through the school system that we are actually preparing these children to be able to deal with our world as they emerge into it. It's scary enough sometimes for our children when they are moving into adulthood, let alone to have a disability on top of that. As a government we will work hard in that transition period.

As well, we do have the Disability Action Council that we established to help us as a government to figure out where the gaps are in the services we're providing and the services that are needed. I believe that this is something that's going to be ongoing with us.

I may not be able to answer the hon. member's question to the degree that she's hoping for, but I can commit as a

government and as the minister responsible, we will work with these families to do the best that we can to ensure that they will not have as many worries as they may have right now.
Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Alberton-Roseville.

Alberton liquor store

Mr. Murphy: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

My question is to the hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture, my old seatmate over there.

The liquor store in Alberton is –

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct) old?

Mr. Murphy: All right, maybe he's a little younger than me.

The liquor store in Alberton is an important part of our retail business sector up there. I understand that the retail liquor stores are pretty good source of revenue generators for the province here. The Alberton store has not seen improvements since it was built. I'd like to ask the hon. Minister: Are there any plans to address this?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Henderson: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Thanks for the question from the hon. member, my former seatmate on the other side.

Anyway, yes, the liquor store in Alberton is one of our 19 liquor stores we have across Prince Edward Island, and our Liquor Control Commission administers those services that they're providing to our customers. Last year I believe sales were in the \$1.4 million range at that particular store. As the minister responsible for the Liquor Control Commission, we're always striving to see what we can do to improve those services to our customers and make all our facilities as profitable as they possibly can be so we can provide the services that are so badly needed in our province.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: Supplementary question, the hon. Member from Alberton-Roseville.

Mr. Murphy: So there is a schedule of renovations planned for the Alberton store (Indistinct)?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Henderson: Yes, Madam Speaker, actually I think just recently a tender just closed for a renovation and upgrade to the Alberton liquor store.

I believe we're looking at putting a refrigerated area in there once again to provide improved services to the customers that are looking for that service.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road.

O'Leary Health Centre walk-in clinic

Mr. Perry: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Premier just mentioned that health care in PEI is changing and that walk-in clinics across PEI help Islanders. They would help if they were actually open.

West Prince health care is in serious need of attention from this government. The most recent announcement of the temporary closure of the O'Leary walk-in clinic has marked the fourth time in the last two months that government has closed a clinic because of a lack of physician coverage.

This government has boasted about their record on physician recruitment, but the reality is that the walk-in clinic services are suffering in O'Leary because of their inability to recruit and to retain doctors in the area.

Premier, what is your government's plan to address the continuous closures at the O'Leary Health Centre walk-in clinic?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

With regards to any closures, we're never happy when they happen. Having said that, there is a work-life balance out there that exists today. There are going to be times when physicians are going to take their time off, they're going to take vacation. Heaven forbid, there are times when physicians get sick. There are going to be issues like that.

We'll make sure that as a government we remain committed to providing the adequate number of health care providers across the province. I'm very excited that in West Prince we've seen a major investment in O'Leary, perhaps in the tune of \$5 million, to their hospital in that area. We've been able to maintain a 24-hour emergency service in the Alberton area and we've been able to add an ambulance to the Tignish area.

These are all great improvements since 2007 when we came to power, Madam Speaker, and we'll continue to make these investments as we move forward because West Prince and health care are priorities for our government.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road.

Mr. Perry: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The residents of O'Leary have already lost many prominent services at the O'Leary Community Hospital. Now they are worried this may be a sign that the walk-in services may be lost as well.

Premier, can you assure the residents of O'Leary that there will be no future closures at the O'Leary Health Centre walk-in clinic?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

We'll make sure that, providing the adequate number of doctors in that area – we're not planning on changing the coverage in that area. But it's important to note, the hon. member talked about losing services. It's all about providing the best possible health care. For too long in the

Province of Prince Edward Island one of our main problems with health care was that we were revolving around silos: a silo around the Alberton hospital, we need to provide a silo around O'Leary, a silo around Tyne Valley, Summerside, Charlottetown, Montague, Souris.

Well, guess what? Those silos are gone under our government, because guess what? We are one Island health care system. What happens in O'Leary or Alberton makes a difference in what happens in Summerside and Charlottetown. We're going to make sure that we maintain that.

While some of the services in O'Leary have changed – some were lost, some more were gained, and it's more now around preventative measures in that area. I think in the long term we'll see that these investments have been a wise decision by our government, and will offer better health care services to each and every Islander.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Souris walk-in clinic

Mr. LaVie: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Premier, when I was on the campaign trail there were a lot of issues in my district, and one of the two top issues was jobs and walk-in clinics. People up there are uncertain surrounding their walk-in clinic. It's been closed and opened and closed.

Can you just explain to the people why it's closing so many times?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Most likely because there's not doctor coverage available is why it's closing. But I believe the complement in the Souris area is four. Unfortunately, there were a couple of doctors that chose to leave from that area. There was another one that was supposed to be coming in, that was coming in from I think it was Manitoba or Saskatchewan. Unfortunately, they had a flood out there, their farm got flooded. They weren't able to make it on time.

We do work with locums, Madam Speaker, but as long as there are physicians available we'll make sure that that walk-in coverage will be available.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Mr. LaVie: Premier, minister, he announced that there'd be a shortage of - it'd be temporary physicians until mid-November. Can you tell us what's going to happen after mid-November?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Hopefully we'll have permanent physicians, Madam Speaker.

That's what the plan is. Sometimes you have to bring in locums to help deal with short-term issues. Other times you look to bring in long-term physicians. But today our physicians are a little more transient in terms of being able to move all over the world and work. We're doing our best to attract them into all areas of the province and we'll continue to make it a priority.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

Urgent medical care and Charlottetown overcrowding

Mr. LaVie: Madam Speaker, Premier, Health PEI says people with urgent medical (Indistinct) has to go to Montague.

Montague doesn't have 24-hour coverage, and here we are going into Charlottetown. Charlottetown's getting overcrowded. Nurses, doctors, everybody in Charlottetown, excellent people. But we're just overcrowding them and they haven't got the staff to keep up.

Premier, what is your fix for this situation?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you for that question. You want to know what? It's a good question.

Obviously we're not going to send people to the emergency in Montague when it's closed. That's why we've increased

ambulance coverage across the province, and there will never be an emergency that's turned down. If someone has an emergency, they call their ambulance, they head into the hospital. It goes in the order of priority and then they are able to do that.

Of course, the emerg at the QEH is designed for a population base that can handle quite a few. I'm not exactly sure what the number is, but obviously that area in eastern PEI is also included in that. Obviously there're going to be changes in health care, but being able to provide the best possible emergency service is something that's important. But also the increases and the new capacity that we've created under our new ambulance system in the Province of Prince Edward Island is something that is extremely beneficial as well.

Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader.

ER Montague

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question for the Premier. Premier, the people of Kings County, they've been waiting now for three years. You shut down the ER in Montague. It was going to be a temporary shutdown in Montague. Now three years have gone past and it's still not open. Can you please tell the House today why it's not open?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much.

It's about health and safety. Bottom line, what it boils down to. I'm sure the hon. member knows full well that there is a good complement of physicians in the Montague area. They may not necessarily want to work in the ER at night because it's not under the safest environment. It would be a sin if I went out and ordered those physicians to then work the night shift at the ER, and the next thing you know is the physicians say to me: I'm not working here anymore, and then you lose those physicians.

It's a bit of a Catch-22. The coverage that we're providing now is adequate coverage. Obviously we do this in consultation with our health care professionals. I'm not a

professional. The Member from Georgetown-St. Peters isn't. But what I'm being told is the coverage that we're providing now is good coverage for the residents of that area.

Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Mr. Myers: So just to go back here then, it's not safe there at night, is basically the answer, which is mind-boggling, but anyway.

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct).

QEH staffing (further)

Mr. Myers: Why is it that we're sending all those people from Kings County now to Charlottetown and we keep hearing that they're understaffed, that they can't keep up. They're understaffed. Can you tell me why, over the past three years, you haven't done anything to satisfy the staff shortages at the QEH?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: We have, Madam Speaker.

There have been numerous new physicians hired at the QEH.

Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Island EMS and Montague hospital

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

To go back to what you said earlier, you talked about how we've given more ambulances to the regions and that we have a better coverage out there. I personally don't believe that to be true. But now we find out that Island EMS now has the authority to bypass Montague to go directly to QEH. Why are you giving up control of Health PEI to Island EMS, Mr. Premier?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

The hon. member can pretend he's an expert all he wants, but he's not, and neither am I.

But I listen to the professionals. If the professionals say that obviously if someone has a major heart attack or something that cannot be dealt with at one hospital, they're going to go to the next one. Just so the hon. member knows, there's a lot of instances where they arrive at the QEH in Charlottetown and then they get airlifted to Halifax because they're not able to perform those duties here.

Perhaps the hon. member should sit down with some professionals, look at exactly what we're trying to do here in the Province of Prince Edward Island. I'd be more than happy to contact the department and Health PEI and set up a briefing for him because I think it would be very informative, actually, for all the new members of the Legislature.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I'm not standing here today pretending that I'm an expert on anything, as a matter of fact, Mr. Premier. What I'm here – I haven't talked to, I haven't consulted the professionals, and I have to apologize for that. People who I'm hearing this from are Islanders. Maybe those are the people that you should start listening to.

Can you tell me why Island EMS has the authority to shut down Montague hospital?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: I don't think they have the authority to do that. But what they have the authority to do, because they are trained professionals, is decide, when they have a patient, which is the best hospital to take them to.

Would the Member from Georgetown-St. Peters want to be making that decision himself on which hospital someone in an ambulance should be going to? Or would he rather have the professionals there? I tell you what. If I was in the back of an ambulance, I would want the Island paramedics deciding which hospital I should be going to, and not the Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Ambulance coverage

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I guess we're going back to having Island EMS making decisions for us, and that's great. Now the other day I'm coming in here for a session and there's an accident, and it's out in Kings County. I happen to hear about it. On my way in I meet the ambulance coming from Charlottetown to Kings County. Can you tell me Mr. Premier, is that a regular occurrence?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much.

Sometimes there could be ambulances coming from Kings County into Charlottetown. There could be ambulances going from Charlottetown to Summerside. It's all about coverage and where the calls come from.

Speaker: Final question.

The hon. Opposition House Leader.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We know for a fact that there's lots and lots of nights where there's not an ambulance in Kings County at all. As a matter of fact, we know that there are lots of nights that the only ambulance covering all the way to East Point happens to be sitting in Charlottetown.

Mr. Premier, do you think that's an acceptable response time for rural PEI?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier Ghiz: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

The hon. member can try and play this as a rural-urban divide all he wants. The fact of the matter is we provide the best possible health care for each and every Islander, regardless of where they live in the Province of Prince Edward Island. We have professionals out there. They know where they should be located to get to each and every Islander in the best possible timeframe.

available. I'm extremely confident in the professionals that we have at Island EMS to be able to make those decisions.

If the hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters thinks that he knows more than Island EMS, I suggest he go to Holland College, take the paramedics course, become a paramedic in the Province of Prince Edward Island, and start ordering around the Island ambulances on where they should be located across Prince Edward Island.

Speaker: End of Question Period.