

March 14, 2018

[Original]

Health Care Services

Mr. B. Macdonald: We now have a crisis in health care thanks to the mismanagement by the Gallant government. In the mandate of the Gallant government, ambulance off-road times have more than doubled because paramedics cannot be found to staff the ambulances. We have fewer and fewer paramedics doing more and more work, and they are burning out too. The question that I have for the Premier today is very simple: Is the Premier satisfied with the standard of ambulance care in New Brunswick?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I will certainly let the Minister of Health answer the member's questions, but I want to make it clear that having him and his colleagues shouting about a crisis in our health care system will not help reduce waiting lists.

[Original]

We, as a government, understand that wait times in our health care system have been a challenge for decades. The difference between our government and what is being proposed by the opposition is that we want to invest strategically in our plan to reduce wait times and ensure the best quality and accessibility possible in our health care system.

Meanwhile, the opposition members would have us cut into health care. They would have us not invest as much as we have invested and are investing in health care. Thankfully, we do not agree with their approach. We will be investing to ensure that we have the best health care possible for the people of our province.

Mr. B. Macdonald: We certainly acknowledge that wait times have been a challenge, but this government has succeeded only in making us the worst in the country. Every year, this government is spending more and more in health care, but the results are getting worse and worse. The Premier brags about spending hundreds of millions of dollars, yet look at the results.

Ambulances have been off-road 55% more over the course of the government's mandate. This has more than doubled to 30 000 hours off-road per year. Look at the nurse shortage. It is at the point that emergency facilities in Moncton have to be closed because they cannot staff them. Look at wait times. They are the worst wait times in Canada. Of course, we could visit a hospital to see the overcrowding for ourselves, see the people in the hallways. If that is not



completely unacceptable, over 40 000 New Brunswickers still cannot access a family doctor. How is this making health care better?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: I can tell you that we understand there are challenges when it comes to wait times in our province and that is why we are investing to ensure that we address these challenges.

We just do not agree with the opposition. We do not agree that austerity or cutting into health care is the answer. The members opposite and the Leader of the Opposition like to dance around and say: Oh, you know, these investments are wrong. Then when you ask them which investments are wrong, they do not want to say. This is because they know that we are making the right investments and they recognize that it will take time to get the results that we all want to see and that New Brunswickers deserve.

We are investing in new nursing homes, as an example, because this will help the quality of life of seniors in our province. It will also help reduce wait times, and it will help the health care system. Every time there is a senior in a bed in a hospital who does not need to be there, it costs all of us more and it deteriorates the quality of life of that senior. Having more nursing home beds will help the system, but of course, it will take some time to build them and to make sure that we have the senior care that they deserve.

Mr. B. Macdonald: The Premier talks about time. The government has had time. He has had four years to fix these problems. It is not for a lack of money. He brags that the government is investing hundreds of millions of dollars. We do not disagree with that. What we disagree with is the fact that it is not producing the right results. The government is going in exactly the wrong direction.

Let's look at ambulance care. The minister said yesterday that it is kind of good enough. Well, New Brunswickers demand one hundred percent coverage. When they call an ambulance in New Brunswick, they expect the ambulance to arrive on time. Are the people of Chipman satisfied with the ambulance service that they are getting? No, they are not, because this Premier took that ambulance away. What about the people in Kouchibouquac? Are they satisfied with ambulance service? They are not. It is great that the Premier is investing. What is he doing to ensure that people get the service that they are paying for?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Here are some of the things that we have been up to, to address the challenges when it comes to wait times in our health care system and to ensure we have the best possible quality of and access to health care. We are investing hundreds of millions of dollars over the next few years in the DECH, the Saint John Regional Hospital, the Moncton Hospital, the Dumont hospital, the Bathurst regional hospital, the Edmundston Regional Hospital, the Miramichi Regional Hospital, the Charlotte County Hospital, and the Perth-Andover hospital. There are many other investments in our infrastructure, including the Fredericton Community Health Centre.



We are hiring 25 more family doctors. We are hiring more specialists. We have Family Medicine New Brunswick, which is an innovative approach to improve access to primary care for the people of our province. We are hiring more nurse practitioners. We are addressing hip and knee replacement wait times. We are ensuring that all rural hospitals in our province stay open, which is something that the Leader of the Opposition would not do. We are the government that has invested the most in health care in the history of our province.

Mr. B. Macdonald: Once again, the Premier talks about great numbers and great investments, but we want to look at the results. If you are spending that much money, what results are we getting? Let's look at family doctors, as an example. The Premier just said that he wants to hire... He said that the government is hiring 25 more family doctors. The reality is that it already promised to hire 50 more and it cannot fill those spots, so promising to hire more doctors does not mean that we actually have more doctors in New Brunswick.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. B. Macdonald: Can the Premier tell us, of those 25 doctors he says that he has hired, how many are actually in New Brunswick now?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Since we took office, in fact, we have hired over 300 doctors. I do not have the data in front of me, but, if I am not mistaken, that gives us a net increase of 90 doctors, since a few have retired. So, there are 90 more doctors in our province, and we are still hiring more specialists and family doctors to address the waiting list situation in New Brunswick.

Also, we are making strategic investments in the programs I listed earlier. So, I would ask the member this: If you do not like what we are doing, well, can you name the investments you do not like and the ones you will cut if ever your party takes office?

We know the Leader of the Opposition wants to close rural hospitals, while, on this side, we are going to continue to invest in our infrastructure and our health care system.

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

Mr. B. Macdonald: Once again, they are spending and not investing. There is a difference. When you spend, the money goes out the door. When you invest, you get some results back. Let's judge on results.

The Fraser Institute looked at New Brunswick and looked at wait times. It saw that in the last year alone, hospital wait times increased by three weeks. We are spending more money—great



announcements by the Premier—but the results are not there. That puts us last in the country for wait times.

As the Premier said, wait times are not a new problem. He has had four years to study it, he has had four years to invest, and we have had four years to see results. What results are we seeing? Three additional weeks of wait time. We are last in the country. That is not investing—it is just spending. Let's hear the results. How is the Premier's investment improving wait times?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: The reality is that the previous government—the Conservative government in which the Leader of the Opposition was Finance Minister—was cutting into health care and cutting into education. Because of this, it was actually retracting the New Brunswick economy. The economy shrank under its mandate because of those cuts. Not only did it have a deficit when it came to the provincial budget, but also it had a deficit of the right investments to improve the quality of care in New Brunswick.

We are addressing it, but I want New Brunswickers to know that we are investing hundreds of millions of dollars over the next few years in major projects at the DECH, the Saint John Regional Hospital, the Moncton Hospital, the Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont hospital, the Edmundston Regional Hospital, the Bathurst regional hospital, and the list goes on. But these investments are over a few years. It is unfortunate that the Leader of the Opposition, when he was Minister of Finance, did not make those investments so that wait times could be where they should be right now. But fret not, because we will invest strategically to reduce wait times and to improve the quality and accessibility of health care in our province.

Mr. B. Macdonald: It is interesting. At some point, this Premier has to take responsibility for his decisions. He has had four years now to address the problems with wait times. He has told us that he has identified them. He has told us that he is focused on them. He has told us that he has invested in them. Yet, the results speak for themselves—three additional weeks. New Brunswickers have to wait three more weeks than they did last year to get important surgery.

Do you know what else has increased? The amount of time that ambulances are off-road in this province. The Premier brags about a 1% increase in the economy. Well, the increase in off-road time is 55%. How is that acceptable? If the Premier claims he is investing, let's see the results. How is he going to improve hospital wait times, and how is he going to improve ambulance off-road times?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Let's take an example of the investments we are making. Yes, some of them will take time. I am quoting here. We have, over the next few years, an investment of \$200 million at the DECH, right here in Fredericton, to have a new surgical suite as well as a gynecology, maternal, and newborn unit. We believe that this investment is strategic because it is creating jobs in the construction phase and it is ensuring that, once the project is complete, we can yet again improve the quality and accessibility of health care in our province.



Unfortunately, this investment was not made by the previous government. It was not made because the Leader of the Opposition, when he was Minister of Finance, wanted to cut into health care, did not want to invest in our infrastructure, and wanted to focus on the wealthy and on big businesses so that he could try to grow the economy but, instead, shrank it. We are not taking the approach of the Leader of the Opposition. We are not going to follow austerity measures. We are going to invest strategically to grow the economy and improve health care.

Mr. B. Macdonald: Again, to my point, spending does not equal investment. The government members claim that they are investing, yet we do not see the results.

Let's look for a moment at the Medavie deal. The government members are spending an additional \$4.4 million. What are we getting for that? We are getting dozens of more administrators, but we are not getting one additional nurse. We are not getting one additional paramedic, yet ambulances are off-road 55% more. What are they doing with the Medavie deal? They are asking the same paramedics who are already calling in sick because they have mental health issues to do even more and more work. That is not a solution. They have spent \$4.4 million. They have dozens of more administrators. They have no more paramedics, and what paramedics they have, they are stressing to the max, to the breaking point. Will the Premier not now revise the Medavie deal and ensure that they add additional paramedics to the equation?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Well, I am not going to let the member opposite get away with his little preamble. If he thinks that we are spending and not investing, then I would ask him to clarify the following things. Which of these projects that I am going to list would be spending and not investing?

Is it the Two Nations Crossing interchange in Fredericton, is it the huge investments in the Centennial Building in Fredericton, is it the Hanwell Road investments that we have made, is it the \$14 million that we have given to Fredericton High School, or is it the millions of dollars that we are investing in new schools in the region? Is it the Healthy Living research centre at the University of New Brunswick that would be spending and not investing? Is it the new Fredericton Downtown Community Health Centre that is spending and not investing, or is it the next few years of investing \$200 million in the DECH for a new surgical suite as well as a gynaecology, maternal, and newborn unit? Which one of these projects would be spending and not investing?

Mr. B. Macdonald: The question I asked was very specific.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order. Order.

Mr. B. Macdonald: I asked about the \$4.4 million that is going to Medavie to employ dozens of more administrators yet is not adding one single more paramedic. The Premier only has to look



at the cover of the three major dailies in this province to see that there is a health care crisis, but he will not acknowledge it. To fix a crisis, you need first to acknowledge that you have the problem, but this Premier is obfuscating. He will not acknowledge that there is a challenge here, that there is a problem. With respect to Medavie, if the Premier, with the Medavie deal, is going to ask paramedics to do more and if he is going to hire more people to manage them, will he at least ensure there are more paramedics hired to solve the real problem?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: It is very clear that the member opposite is excited that he is leading off question period, but he wanted to open up the preamble. He talked about spending versus investment. I mean, we can get Hansard to read it back to him, if he wants. He said that spending is happening with this government and not investing. Obviously, I think that New Brunswickers deserve to know what he means by that, so let's use some examples yet again.

I would ask the member opposite to clarify. The Two Nations Crossing interchange that we are investing in, the investments in the Centennial Building, the investments in the Hanwell Road, the \$14 million for the renovations at Fredericton High, the Healthy Living research centre at the University of New Brunswick, the new Fredericton Downtown Community Health Centre, and the \$200 million that we are investing in the DECH for a new surgical suite as well as a gynecology and maternal and newborn unit—are those spending initiatives, or are they investments? We believe that they are investments. We believe that these investments are going to help the region and the province create jobs, grow the economy, improve health care accessibility and quality, and deliver good education for our people.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. B. Macdonald: The Premier can read that list as many times as he likes, but the question that I asked was very simple.

If he wants to know what investment we do not think is appropriate, let's start with the Medavie deal. That is \$4.4 million that is adding more administrators to tell the same overworked paramedics to do their jobs better, to work harder. That is not acceptable. We have a crisis with paramedics that this Premier will not acknowledge. He is denying that we have that problem, yet the facts speak for themselves. I know that he does not want to pay attention to facts. He would rather give us insincere platitudes, but the facts speak for themselves. In 2016, ambulances were off-road for 17 000 hours. Last year, by 2017, they were off-road for 30 000 hours. The problem is getting worse. The Premier is working the same people harder and harder. What is he going to do to ensure that paramedics are better cared for in this province?



[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Here are the facts: We are investing in our infrastructure, including health care infrastructure, to create jobs, grow the economy, and ensure we have a high-quality, accessible health care system.

The fact is that we have invested more money in our health care system with each budget we have tabled. The fact is that we are investing strategically and hiring more doctors, more specialists, and more nurse practitioners. We are making investments to shorten waiting lists for surgery like knee and hip replacements.

We are working with stakeholders to make the investments that are needed to keep people healthy and shorten waiting lists. We want our families and communities to be healthy; that is our objective in everything we do.

So, we are investing in order to reduce poverty, help our seniors, and help our youth get an education. We are proud of our investments and will continue to make them.

[Original]

Mr. Speaker: Time, Premier.

Nursing Homes

Mr. Crossman: Yesterday, the Premier did not answer a question about nursing home beds. During budget estimates, we learned that there were 112 nursing home beds sitting empty because of the acute shortage of workers to staff them. In spite of this, the Premier is out making election promises that he will be building more nursing homes. I am guessing this is an election strategy because it does not make a bit of sense to the people who are paying attention and are aware that there are 112 beds sitting empty right now. Can the Premier tell us whether he is aware that there is a critical shortage of nursing home workers?

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We have, I believe, over 4 000 nursing home beds across the province, so when you have 112 vacant, that is mostly, I am sure, attributed to the fact that you have some turnover and you have some residents who would be leaving the nursing homes and residents who would be coming in. Second, 30 of those 112 nursing home beds to which they refer, I am told, are actually 30 beds that are under construction in Sussex.

I wish the opposition members would stop fearmongering. At the same time, I am sort of happy that they are because, in this case, it is demonstrating clearly what they think we should be doing as a government and what they would do if they were the government. What they would do is to stop investing in infrastructure. They would stop investing in health care and education. They would cut into our health care and education. They would continue to help the wealthy and the large corporations, as they did during their last mandate. All of this would retract our



economy. We do not believe in that. We are going to invest in our communities and invest in infrastructure, growing the economy and helping the quality of life of New Brunswickers.

Mr. Crossman: In 2016, New Brunswick's Auditor General delivered a report in which she said the Gallant government did not have a sustainable plan for nursing homes. The New Brunswick Association of Nursing Homes and the New Brunswick Nurses' Union have both been voicing concerns over the growing staffing issue for many months. I myself have seen it firsthand. The Gallant government recently announced it would come up with a five-year plan for nursing homes. I would ask the Premier to tell us whether there are any targets for actual numbers of nursing home workers and whether there are any timelines in place to get these 112 empty beds staffed.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Firstly, for 30 of the 112 beds the member is referring to, the plan is to build the building first.

Secondly, I can tell you that we understand that we have to increase efforts to hire staff. This is a challenge for every province across our country, including New Brunswick. I can tell you that our government is taking this challenge seriously.

[*Original*]

What I am really not surprised, but certainly disappointed, to hear is that the opposition members are saying yet again today that they do not want us to be investing in communities, they do not want us to be investing in infrastructure to create jobs, and they do not want us to be investing in nursing homes. I will be very happy to let New Brunswickers know that those members are against the investments that we are making in nursing homes, whether they are the renovations to existing nursing homes or the addition of new memory care or nursing home beds. I will let the people know that those members do not like these investments. But I can tell you that our government believes that it helps the quality of life of seniors and helps to create jobs.

Mr. Crossman: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is credited with saying "Without goals, and plans to reach them, you are like a ship that has set sail with no destination."

We certainly believe there is room for improvement with the nursing homes. It seems as though the election promises that are taking place right now across the province are going to small areas and are big promises. There are larger areas that need the same attention. There are renovations, not major projects, to keep things in place or to add to and fix those empty rooms that the Premier just talked about. When people leave those rooms and there is a 48-hour turnaround, I personally believe they should be painted, upgraded, and made ready for the next resident. How does the Premier intend to staff new nursing home beds? There are 112 beds empty, with no one to staff them at the present time.



[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: Our government is concentrating on its multi-year plan to grow the provincial economy. As part of this plan, we are advocating investments in our infrastructure, because that will enable us to grow the economy and create jobs. It will help us invest in our schools, our hospitals, and our nursing homes. It will help us build more schools and nursing homes. It will help us provide the highways and bridges our businesses need to send their goods and services to markets around the world.

[Original]

We believe these investments are important for the communities. We believe investing in our existing nursing home infrastructure will help ensure the best quality of care for seniors. Creating more nursing home and memory care beds is important, with the aging population that we have. It will help ensure that the system can sustain itself in the long term by reducing the cost to the hospitals and, of course, improving the quality of life of those seniors. We are going to continue to make these strategic investments on behalf of New Brunswickers.

Psychiatric Care

Mr. Coon: The Fredericton and Upper River Valley area is desperately short of psychiatrists. In 2015, there were 2 000 admissions to the emergency departments at the Chalmers hospital and the other hospitals for mental health concerns, and two years later, that has jumped to 3 000 admissions. The government has also established some new mental health programs in the past year or so, but it has not invested in the necessary staffing to make them run and to provide psychiatric resources.

The problem in this region is that there are no Medicare billing numbers left to hire psychiatrists, despite there being psychiatrists who have indicated they want to move to the region and work here in Fredericton and in the Upper River Valley. The system is bursting at the seams, and people are needlessly suffering with mental health challenges when that need not be the case. Will the minister allocate more billing numbers to the Fredericton and Upper River Valley region so that there will be enough psychiatrists to treat the New Brunswickers who are forced to go without?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Bourque: I am pleased to talk about the mental health initiatives we are taking here in the province. Obviously, we made an announcement about needing more specialists in the system, and we are assessing which particular ones are needed for the various health networks, based on the needs they have identified.

I can also talk to you about several of the mental health initiatives we have taken. There is also everything that has been done in the schools and integrated services, as well as everything



involving peer mentoring, which is working very well. We also have a whole new strategy on addiction. We are implementing these initiatives to deal with these realities in mental health. We feel mental health is a priority for our government, and we will continue to invest in this field to move the situation forward.

[Original]

Mr. Coon: The Fredericton and Upper River Valley health region is about eight psychiatrists short, and in fact, it is being treated unfairly compared to the numbers of psychiatrists in Saint John and Moncton. Both those regions have many more psychiatrists for the population. For example, in this region, there is a pressing need for another position in child and youth psychiatry. In 2012, there were just under 200 new referrals to child and adolescent psychiatry. By 2016, that number of referrals had leaped to more than 310. Children and youth who are considered medium priority are now waiting six months or more for an appointment to see a psychiatrist. I cannot imagine how frustrated and worried their parents must be.

Will the minister answer this simple question? Will he make the necessary billing numbers available to this region to provide the psychiatric relief that so many are desperately seeking in Fredericton and in the Upper River Valley?

Hon. Mr. Bourque: When it comes to billing numbers, I am happy to report that we have announced that we will be adding billing numbers within the system. Those billing numbers include specialists. We will let the regional health authorities determine where the priorities are.

As the member opposite has often asked questions on other situations regarding other specialties in other areas of health, he knows full well that there are many areas in which we have challenges, and we acknowledge that. For those reasons, we let the regional health authorities determine where the billing numbers will go. Of course, we will work with the regional health authorities to make sure that the appropriate billing numbers go to the appropriate places, where the need is the greatest. We will make sure, once again, that New Brunswickers are best treated when it comes to mental health care. Thank you.

Mr. Coon: The reason there is so much competition for things such as billing numbers is that the cracks in our health care system have been widening significantly. If you look at the Upper River Valley, children and youth wait over 8 months to see a psychiatrist while the wait times for adults are 13 months in Woodstock and 17 months in Perth-Andover. These cracks that are growing in our general health system and our mental health system are swallowing people whole.

The government has been creating new programs, yes, but it has been more like checking off boxes. When it does not provide the necessary resources to ensure that the Integrated Service Delivery is properly staffed or to ensure that the new psychiatric mental health teams are properly staffed, those programs draw away from the work of other psychiatrists and



specialists. This means they are unable to do the work, and it adds to the wait times. This is checking boxes. It is not good governance, it is not good administration, and it is not good management.

My question is this specifically: Will the minister release the Medicare billing numbers needed to...

Mr. Speaker: Time, member.

Hon. Mr. Bourque: Once again, I can only repeat that we are adding new billing numbers to the system. The RHAs are responsible for determining where the priorities lie. We will work with the RHAs to see how we can better serve the population of New Brunswick.

We do acknowledge that mental health care is important to New Brunswickers. Good mental health is good health, and I can certainly acknowledge that. Since my mother is a retired mental health nurse, I certainly understand the value of that. I can assure you that we are looking at this situation closely and that we are making sure that mental health and addictions in New Brunswick are treated with the highest standards to make sure that patients are being cared for at the best possible time by the appropriate care provider and to make sure that New Brunswickers have the best mental health care possible.

Conflict of Interest

Ms. Wilson: Will the Premier clear up some confusion regarding perceived or apparent conflicts of interest and his position versus the position taken by his government? A Gallant government statement to the CBC says, “government believes that conflicts of interest—perceived or apparent—undermine its ability to govern”. The statement adds that the Gallant government is open to additional changes to strengthen the law. Is that now the position taken by the Premier?

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Gallant: We are of course still open to discussing ways to strengthen rules and Acts concerning conflicts of interest, and we demonstrated our willingness to do so when we recently made changes to them. So, we understand how important it is to have rules that ensure New Brunswickers can see that conflicts of interest are indeed being addressed by elected representatives. Therefore, we are proud of what we did a few months ago now.

[Original]

This certainly gives me a chance to say that we are very pleased with the fact that we will soon be able to vote on the budget that we introduced a few weeks ago. It is a budget that is investing record amounts in education and record amounts in health care. It is a budget that





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will help us stimulate the economy and create jobs, and it is a budget in which we have reduced the deficit by more than half.

Mr. Speaker: The time for oral questions has expired.

