

# Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee—Supplementary Budget Estimates October 2006

## Answers to Questions on Notice

### Parliamentary Portfolio, Department of Parliamentary Services

#### Topic: Influenza vaccinations

#### Question P2, F&PA 37

Senator FAULKNER—It is a question of whether people have been asked. I went through a range of issues: identification, support and the like. I do not even know whether the culture of the department is such that anyone who is in this situation would feel comfortable in coming forward and seeking assistance. I would be pretty doubtful that that would be the case. Nevertheless, I still suggest to you that there is a duty of care for all concerned. I have heard enough today and from people who have been either directly or indirectly affected, or who think they might have been or believe they have knowledge of it, for me to have sufficient concerns to at least raise them at this committee. I hope someone will consider following it through. At the end of the day, you can of course only deal with matters that are properly before you, and I accept that—I do not want anyone to deal with rumours—but on something as important as this, where the health and wellbeing of staff of DPS are concerned, you have to make every possible effort to ensure that you are doing all that you can to identify a problem if it exists and provide support in those circumstances.

Ms Penfold—I accept that. As I have promised, I will give you an indication of what we have done.

Senator FAULKNER—I will look at that when it comes through. I appreciate that.

#### Answer

1 Between 15 and 17 March 2005 Health Services Australia (**HSA**) administered 521 influenza vaccinations to building occupants as part of DPS's annual vaccination program. 280 DPS employees took advantage of the program.

2 DPS first became aware of a possible problem in late March/early April 2005 when a Library employee contacted the Manager of the Nurses Centre and advised her that one of his staff was on sick leave. He believed her illness may have been related to the influenza vaccination she had received as part of the DPS program.

3 At that time the Manager of the Nurses Centre contacted HSA and told them of the situation. HSA advised that they had not had any other reports of individuals becoming ill after being vaccinated. This was confirmed again with HSA by DPS in June 2006. HSA has advised DPS that where an individual has an adverse reaction when they receive the vaccination, HSA will refer the individual to their medical provider for further assessment.

4 The employee concerned was subsequently diagnosed with Guillane-Barre Syndrome and was off work from 22 March 2005 until 1 August 2005. During this period the individual exhausted her paid personal leave and was granted additional paid personal leave to assist her return to work. As part of her return to work program DPS engaged a case manager to manage her rehabilitation and return to the workplace. The employee resumed full-time duties in the Library in January 2006. The employee was advised by DPS of a possible entitlement to workers compensation but did not lodge a claim.

5 A second employee was seen by a nurse in the Nurses Centre on 10 May 2005 complaining of being generally unwell. According to the notes written by the nurse who attended her there was no mention of the presenting symptoms being attributed to the influenza vaccination from eight weeks previously. The Manager of the Nurses Centre, in a follow-up phone call to the employee on 12 May 2005 to check on her health, again had no indication from the employee that the influenza vaccination may have been the cause of the employee's state of health. In her notes, the Manager has recorded that the employee had stated to her that she was feeling much better and that the symptoms had eased, although she was still feeling tired.

6 This employee was subsequently diagnosed with transverse myelitis in September 2005. She submitted a compensation claim on the basis that her condition was caused by the influenza vaccination she received in March 2005. This employee continued to work with some time off due to her condition. Her compensation claim was accepted and her treating doctors notified DPS of her specific work restrictions. DPS engaged a case manager in February 2006 to assist with her rehabilitation.

7 The employee was non-ongoing and ceased employment with DPS on 16 June 2006. She resumed employment with DPS as an ongoing employee on 23 October 2006. Her rehabilitation and return to work arrangements continue to be managed by a dedicated case manager.

8 More general concerns about health issues affecting Library staff were raised at the DPS Consultative Forum meeting on 27 June 2006 and in writing through a minute from the Acting Assistant Secretary, Research Branch on 7 July 2006.

9 In response to the concerns raised at the Consultative Forum, staff representatives (including union organisers who attend the Forum) were asked to provide more specific evidence of sickness among DPS staff. To date no employees or their representatives have provided any evidence on which to base an investigation.

10 DPS has done a comparison of personal leave usage for the financial years 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 between Library employees and the rest of the department's staff. The comparison showed that in 2004-2005 Library staff used, on average, approximately half a day more in personal leave than the average across DPS. In 2005-2006 Library staff had the same average usage of personal leave as the rest of DPS.

11 In the DPS newsletter of 6 November 2006 the Secretary restated her invitation to staff who believe that they have been affected by the working

environment to provide specific information. No further information has come to light.

12 DPS will also write to the Clerks, and to the Department of Finance and Administration in respect of staff engaged under the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984*, asking whether their employees have identified any health issues which they believe may be related to the Parliament House working environment.