

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: **Tuesday, May 10, 2005**

1:30 p.m.

Date: 05/05/10

[The Speaker in the chair]

head: **Prayers**

The Speaker: Good afternoon and welcome.

Let us pray. Grant that we the members of our province's Legislature fulfill our office with honesty and integrity. May our first concern be for the good of all of our people. Let us be guided by our deliberations this day. Amen.

Please be seated.

head: **Introduction of Guests**

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Advanced Education.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure today to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly Bryan and Susan Huygen from my constituency of Edmonton-Whitemud. They are, of course, the proud parents of Jennifer Huygen, one of our very talented, dedicated, and hard-working pages. Bryan is the director of business services in the Department of Children's Services, and Susan is a research assistant at the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Alberta. More specifically, she works with the northern Alberta renal program at the U of A hospital. Bryan and Susan are seated in your gallery, and I'd ask that they please stand and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure for me to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of the House 105 visitors from the city of Spruce Grove and the school of Brookwood elementary, which has a well-deserved high reputation as an inclusive school, turning out great results through great kids. They are accompanied by teachers/group leaders Mr. Jeff MacKay, Mrs. Nancy St. Amand, Mrs. Evelyn Nixey, along with parent helpers Mrs. Judy Rackel, Mrs. Diane McKay, Mrs. Denise Mandin, Mrs. Donna Johnson, Mrs. Corinna Nelson, Mrs. Dorothy McGinn, Mrs. Tracy Megaw, Mrs. Alison McConnell, Mrs. Sharon Whalen, Mrs. Lorraine Harrison, Mrs. Karina Beaudoin, Mrs. Christine Blomquist, Mrs. Daphne MacDonald, Mrs. Sharon Nickerson, Mr. Rick Dechaux, and Mrs. Kim Dewan. I believe they're in both galleries, and I would ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this House.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Government Services.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly some five visitors from Japan, here in our province with the Rotary group study exchange program. This program is a unique cultural and vocational exchange opportunity for young professional men and women between the ages of 25 and 40 who are in the initial stages of their professional life. For four to six weeks these team members are studying our country's institutions and our ways of life, observing their own vocations as practised abroad, developing personal and professional leadership and relationships, and exchanging ideas. We trust that their perspectives and the fresh ideas

gathered from this experience with our nation's culture, commerce, and government will prove invaluable as they are applied in fostering growth in their companies and their country.

Now, I'd ask each of our guests to rise as I call out their name and remain standing until we can welcome them. Kimiko Inoue, an opera singer, is learning much about music and culture. Akiko Matsubara, a sales promoter with Panasonic, is learning about sales promotion and the industrial products. Akika Kawamura works at Nanzan University and is learning about college education management and the postsecondary system. Akira Hirai works in the Grand Hotel in Japan and is learning about banquet facility promotion and hotel business. Of course, the team leader, Nobuo Hazama, is retired from the Toyota Motor Company and is busier than ever with his volunteer activities. The Rotary hosts for our Japanese visitors are Katherine Olson, legislative manager with my department, and her fellow Rotarian Mike Colson. I would ask now that the Assembly give them the traditional warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two very special guests seated in the public gallery. Aaron Sorensen, if he would please rise, is a musician turned screenwriter and director originally from the Peace River region. You may have heard of his film *Hank Williams First Nation*.

After writing the script, Aaron turned to his community in Peace River to finance this film, and in fact it was the local IGA store and then the Woodland Cree Nation who supported the film and invested in it. The movie is playing in theatres across the country and has received wonderful reviews. It's an example of the amazing talent waiting to be tapped in Alberta. In fact, out of over 3,200 submissions this movie was chosen as one of only 12 films to compete in the Los Angeles International Film Festival.

With Aaron today is another example of Alberta talent, Edmonton actor Jimmy Herman. Jimmy plays the role of Uncle Martin in *Hank Williams First Nation*. He's also appeared in *Dances With Wolves* and *North of 60*.

Mr. Speaker, I had the pleasure of enjoying this film on its opening showing on Friday night, and I will recommend it to everybody. It is truly wonderful. Please, will all MLAs join me in giving the traditional warm welcome to these fine men?

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly two individuals who are instrumental in helping to bring to the province of Alberta the greatest show on earth. My first introduction is Steve Allan, who is the vice-president of RSM Richter Inc., which is one of the largest independent accounting, business advisory, and consulting firms in Canada. In his spare time he has spent 30 years volunteering and is currently serving as the chairman of the board and president of the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede. As well, we have with us today Vern Kimball, who is the chief operating officer for the Stampede. Vern has spent over 18 years with the Calgary Stampede and has been instrumental in helping the board carry out its vision for redevelopment. They're here today to thank the province for its support of the Stampede. They're seated in the members' gallery, and I'd ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was pleasantly surprised today as I walked up the steps of the Legislature and met a number of seniors from the Golden Age Centre in the village of Breton. They were very complimentary on your visitor services, saying how well they were treated and looked after, even though their visit was set up on fairly short notice. They're in the public gallery today. I would ask them all to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour and pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the hon. members of this Assembly Mr. Harold Wilson, the executive director of the Economic Development Alliance of Southeast Alberta. Harold brings a wealth of knowledge on regional economic development, having been a director for many years for all of northwest Ontario. Southern Alberta is fortunate to have an individual like Harold, who is an exciting, vibrant, energetic man. I'd ask him to rise – he's in the members' gallery – and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a small class that is joining us from one of the high schools in my constituency of Edmonton-Centre, and that's St. Joseph high school. There are nine members of the class that are here today, and they're accompanied by their instructors, Ms Dawson and Ms Costigan. I would ask them all to please rise and accept the warm welcome of the Assembly.

1:40

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my great honour to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly two wonderful people. They are Dr. Raj Shorey, PhD, literature, and Mrs. Chander Shorey, MA, international law, my family friends. They are here this afternoon to tour the Legislature. They are seated in the public gallery. I request them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Ms Calahasen: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a great pleasure for me to rise to introduce to you and through you to members of this Assembly 15 visitors from Northern Lakes College, High Prairie campus. They're actually brought here by Chris Neidig, who is the instructor. I'd ask that they rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and to the members of this Assembly a man who needs no introduction, the president of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees. President of AUPE, Dan MacLennan, please rise and receive the warm welcome of this House.

head: **Oral Question Period**

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Health Facilities Review Committee

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again this government drops the ball on accountability. For years people have been raising serious concerns about long-term care facilities, but this government turned its back, ignoring the plight of some of our most vulnerable citizens. Yesterday the Auditor General added yet another voice to the chorus of people calling for change with a series of shocking revelations. My questions are to the Premier. Given the bland utterances from this government's Health Facilities Review Committee, how did that committee miss the boat so badly on the quality of care problems in long-term care facilities?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the Health Facilities Review Committee does a marvellous job. They drop in unannounced to many long-term care centres and report to the appropriate minister.

Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General's review of 25 long-term care centres found that one-third of those care centres are inadequate or there are some problems associated with them. Having said that, we are taking action. Both the Minister of Health and Wellness and the hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Supports are working on this particular situation and are paying a great deal of attention to the recommendations of the Auditor General. In that regard, I'll have the hon. minister respond.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: given that the government spends over \$500,000 a year on the Health Facilities Review Committee, yet it only completed two investigations into complaints last year, will the Premier move to disband this committee and create a long-term care ombudsman's office, staffed with qualified professionals? [some applause]

Mr. Klein: Well, I hear a lot of thumping over there. I don't know what for.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness – and the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition was there yesterday to hear the answer to a question relative to inspections and complaints received – indicated that there were something like 400 complaints investigated. She mentioned also that there are some 5 million hours of long-term care services offered to about 18,000 residents. We have said quite openly that if there are problems – and obviously there are – identified by the Auditor General, we will address those problems. We will look at the recommendations of the Auditor General and give them very serious consideration.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you. Again to the Premier: will the Premier call an end to the practice of government MLAs serving on and chairing the Health Facilities Review Committee so that true accountability can be re-established instead of Tories just talking to Tories?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, Tories are not talking to Tories. I don't know who the patients and the residents of long-term care centres are. They could be Liberals. They could be members of the NDs. They could be Conservatives. They could be members of the Alliance Party. I don't know who they are. So these are not Tories

talking to Tories. These are Tories talking – well, some Tories. I don't know all the members of the Health Facilities Review Committee. I know that there are some Conservatives. But they're talking to people of all political stripes. They're talking to people with concerns about long-term care.

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

User Fees in Long-Term Care Facilities

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It took the release of a report by the Auditor General to make this government finally acknowledge what the Official Opposition, advocacy groups, staff, families, and residents have been saying for years. The report says that over 50 per cent of basic administrative standards were not met. For example, residents were charged fees for bed alarms, for delivering specimens to the lab, and for the very restraint systems that restrict their movements. My questions are to the Premier. Why is the government allowing these facilities to charge user fees for what most people believe is already covered?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, as I said before, we are reviewing the recommendations of the Auditor General. Relative to action that has already been taken and relative to action that might be taken, I defer to the hon. minister.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the Premier mentioned, we are reviewing the recommendations of the Auditor General. This hon. member that asked this question regarding user fees is very aware that people, as they go into a facility and access a facility – it depends on the facility, but they know that there are issues and there are areas of care that they do pay a fee for. That can include, you know, having your hair done. That can include laundry facilities. It depends on the facility.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: why does the government believe it is appropriate to charge patients for restraints?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know the details relative to the operations of long-term care centres generally in this province. But I can repeat what the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness said yesterday, with the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition in attendance. She said, and I quote, that in the future she will revoke government funding to facilities that are not performing as required.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Premier: will the government put an immediate stop to user fees being charged for medical services and safety equipment in long-term care facilities? Stop it now.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I have in front of me the report of the Auditor General. I don't know what it says relative to user fees.

An Hon. Member: You haven't read it?

Mr. Klein: No, I haven't read it. In response to some of the yipping and yapping from across the way, I have not read the report, but I will. I will read the report, and it's a very thick report, well, comparatively thick. I'm sure that they haven't read it either, verbatim, word for word. Tell me, what's on page 57? They give us a bunch of malarkey about having read the report. They haven't read the report any more than I've read the report. At least I'm honest enough to admit it.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

1:50 Seniors' Benefits Program

Ms Pastoor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Because I have a sincere desire for answers to my questions, I'd like to direct them to the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. The Auditor General exposed the Alberta seniors' benefits program. The annual cost of the program is \$178 million. The objective is to provide support to seniors in need, but there are no criteria in place to determine whether the objective is being met. The department has not defined need and has no process to measure whether the program is sufficient to meet the needs of the seniors. To the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports: how was such a substantial amount of money put into a program when there were no evaluation criteria that existed at the time?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is an evaluation criterion, and it can be improved upon. What I learned as I was doing the business plan is that the criterion is based on threshold levels. It's based on the income of the senior. I can tell you this: approximately half of our seniors do receive income support through this program, and it is working very well. Can it be improved upon? Yes, it can be. Can we do as the Auditor said? Can we define needs in a much more concrete way? Yes, we can, and we will be.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you for that answer without the theatrics. I appreciate that.

It appears that the Department of Seniors and Community Supports only adjusted the Alberta seniors' benefits program based on changes to provincial and federal dollars. Why were the needs of seniors not considered as a deciding factor, as opposed to just dollars?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The needs of seniors were considered, and yes, we do receive funding. We have put in place the threshold levels. We have put in place the amount of money that seniors would receive based on their own income level, and that, of course, is through the federal benefit program. Whether it's the old age security income, whether it's the GIS, whether it's rebates on the GST, that comes into context, and also when we talk about needs, what's in place for people with shelter. With special-needs assistance, for example, we also give seniors a \$5,000 program in that area. So we do consider the seniors' needs, we do consider the income threshold, and we do consider the amount of money that the seniors themselves have through the federal benefit program.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. Will the minister consider consulting with advocacy groups, families, staff, and professional associations in an effort to develop evaluation criteria?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We will enhance what we already do in that area. We already meet with advocacy groups such as the Alberta Senior Citizens Housing Association, the Long Term Care Association, other seniors that we've had introduced here in the Assembly with Seniors United Now, with the Kerby Centre, seniors in Edmonton. We consult on an ongoing basis, and we will continue to do that type of consultation, as I indicated, as we define needs in another way.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Long-term Care Facility Standards

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Auditor General confirmed what families, advocates, and the NDP opposition have been saying for years: long-term care under this government is in crisis and a disgrace in the richest province in Canada. It's long past time that this government accepted responsibility for its neglect of seniors. My question is to the Premier. Will the Premier stand in his place today and apologize to residents and their families for the government's neglect of seniors in government care?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the question as it was framed is a ridiculous question, to say the least. We're talking about one-third of 25 long-term care centres that were examined by the Auditor General. Now, I don't know how many long-term care centres there are in the province.

Mrs. McClellan: A hundred and ninety-seven.

Mr. Klein: There are 197 in the province.

Mr. Speaker, I have indicated in the past that if problems have been identified, they will be addressed. The minister has committed to addressing those problems. The Minister of Health and Wellness has committed to addressing those problems in a very positive way because we are concerned about our seniors, and we want to make sure that they live their lives with respect and dignity.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Why is the Premier trying to duck personal responsibility for the crisis in long-term care, a crisis that has grown unchecked under his watch, and why is he now dragging his feet on implementing the necessary reforms?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know where he gets the notion that we're dragging our feet. Both the hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Supports and the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness indicated in a news scrum yesterday that they were going to take immediate action to address the recommendations of the Auditor General. Immediate action.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, given that yesterday the minister said that the implementation plan wouldn't be available till the fall, why is the

government delaying implementation when this will leave thousands of vulnerable seniors with woefully inadequate care months longer than is necessary? People are suffering, Mr. Premier.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General himself said that it's going to take some time to implement some of the recommendations. You simply don't snap your fingers and things happen overnight.

Relative to steps that are already being taken, I'll have the hon. minister respond.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We've said this in the Assembly as well before, that the Minister of Health and Wellness and my ministry are working together in the development of standards for long-term care, and that's to enhance and to clarify standards that are already in place.

You know, hon. member, when I became minister and we were doing the business plan, that was the number one issue for the business plan, and that was about the standards that are in place. Do you know why? Mr. Speaker, do you know why? It's because we know that long-term care has changed. It's long-term care into the community with designated assisted living, assisted living, wellness, and we know that the issue of standards is extremely important. We gave to the Long Term Care Association and the Alberta Senior Citizens Housing Association over \$200,000 last year to assist with this very issue of the development of standards, and the regional health authorities as well are working on it. As our Premier indicated, this takes time. It needs to be thoughtful, and we are working hard, and it will be in place soon.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

National Child Care Initiative

Mrs. Ady: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I understand that the Minister of Children's Services has reached a verbal agreement with the federal minister, Ken Dryden, on Alberta's participation in a national child care program. My first question is to the Minister of Children's Services. Can you confirm this and indicate progress to date?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will indicate that back in March I reached a verbal agreement with Mr. Dryden, and at that time he agreed to Alberta's position. In fact, we have written Mr. Dryden three times asking him for confirmation in writing of our verbal agreement. I've got staff going to Ottawa this week – I believe it's on Thursday and Friday – and we're encouraging the feds to put their pen on the agreement. Alberta is ready to sign on an agreement that we had.

Mrs. Ady: My second question is to the same minister. Does the minister see any stumbling blocks to this deal being made?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, it's important for us. We had a verbal agreement with Mr. Dryden in March, and we have written him on three separate occasions to get a written agreement. Our position in Alberta has been very consistent and clear right from the beginning. We want an agreement that gives our parents in this province the flexibility to choose from a number of child care options. In Alberta, still, we need to be able to spend the money on

a wide range of programs and services. It's a parental choice in our province. We want a share of the federal money on the per capita. We want flexibility for the parents in our province. It's important for our parents to be able to have a choice in this province for their own children.

2:00

Mrs. Ady: My final supplemental is to the same minister. Given the shaky state of the federal government and the lack of national agreement on child care, what does the minister hope to achieve with consultation on child care being done by her ministry at this time?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think what's important is listening to what Alberta parents want. Given the state of what's happening with the federal government, we still believe that it's important to listen to what parents want in this province. We feel that consultation is a worthwhile investment, to hear what parents in this province want for their children in Alberta. We will continue doing what's right for the people in this province whether the federal Liberals are in government or not.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora, followed by the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose.

Edmonton Remand Centre Assault Incident

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In April 2003 a young man housed in the Edmonton Remand Centre was forced to double-bunk with a violent gang member. Soon after, this young man was verbally and physically abused, threatened, and finally one night was pulled out of his bunk, had a sharpened pencil held to his throat, and was brutally and viciously raped not once but three times. All this happened while this man was supposed to be under the protection of this government. My question is to the Solicitor General. Can the Solicitor General tell us if the safety of this man was the government's responsibility?

The Speaker: The hon. minister, recognizing estimates for this afternoon.

Mr. Cenaiko: That's correct. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The hon. member is correct that the first incident did happen in 2003. The safety of inmates is a top priority for this government and for the corrections officials that work in our corrections facilities throughout the province. It's our policy to segregate known sexual predators. The second incident happened as a result of human error, and disciplinary action was taken at that time.

Now, this type of situation is rare. In the last 10 years there have been three other such incidents across the province, and in that same period more than a quarter of a million people, 250,000 inmates, have gone through our corrections system.

Dr. B. Miller: Given the severe emotional and physical trauma inflicted on this man, and in fact he has not been able to have full-time work, can the minister explain to him how a one-time payment of \$11,000 – that's it: \$11,000 – can pay for all of the long-term counselling he needs and all of the medication? The money was used up long ago.

Mr. Cenaiko: Well, Mr. Speaker, the individual did apply to the victims of crime fund and did receive a cheque for \$11,000, as the member does state. That money was to be used for his assistance regarding psychological counselling if that's what he, indeed,

needed. He accepted the conditions of accepting the cheque from the victims of crime fund and, as well, accepted the responsibility of cashing it.

Dr. B. Miller: Given that this government has never offered an apology, will this minister commit here and now to meeting with this young man and explaining to him why he was not protected and why this government has failed him?

Mr. Cenaiko: Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't have a problem meeting with the young man. We can discuss, in fact, why he was sent to prison as well and look at those issues regarding his sentence and why he went there, what he was charged with. We can talk about it. I don't have a problem meeting with him. This is one of the issues that we deal with. Double-bunking is a normal course throughout North America and throughout Europe as well. Facilities provide double-bunking, and it's a safe measure for inmates and/or those in remand to provide them with a safe environment to live in while they're waiting for court.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Agricultural Research Initiatives

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This past Friday I attended the official opening of an integrated manure utilization system out in Vegreville. This pilot plant will transform manure into energy, biobased fertilizers, and reusable water. It is a prime example of Alberta innovation to develop sustainable solutions for our industry. My first question is for the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. What does this project mean for Alberta's agriculture industry?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks to the hon. member for the question. This is a new and exciting technology that we see, taking a vision and turning it into reality. Highland Feeders, one of the partners, along with the Alberta Research Council are to be commended for seeing this project through, starting with an idea some four or five years ago and, certainly, turning the focus of perhaps BSE and our value-added industry into something that is a vision for the future.

We have not only economic benefits that we can see out of this but also environmental benefits as well. If you envision a feedlot, there are a number of animals on a feedlot. They create a certain amount of waste, which is becoming somewhat of a concern in some areas. This solves that issue, Mr. Speaker, and we look forward to some future with it.

Mr. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: what is your department doing to support other agricultural research initiatives?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Obviously, research and development is something that's key to not only our six-point recovery and restructuring strategy with BSE. We've talked a lot about becoming the centre of excellence for research in agriculture and certainly in BSE research. We've also talked about the SRM, the \$7 million that we're putting towards the risk materials that we're going to need to find a home for. Agriculture is certainly

working with other entities in the province to try to figure out what we can do with those products. Certainly, our key focus at this point in time is on new products and environmentally friendly products.

Mr. Johnson: My final question is to the Minister of Innovation and Science. Given your department's mandate, what are you doing to support agricultural research?

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, last evening we gave a lengthy explanation of the activities of the Department of Innovation and Science. If I could capture it in one sentence, it would be that we provide strategic advice and impetus to encourage innovation in priority areas. In particular, the example that the member raised today, the integrated manure utilization system, shows the work that we are doing in alternative energy research: how we can sell that power onto the grid in our deregulated marketplace, how we can effectively manage water, and provide value to the agriculture industry. All of these initiatives come out of innovation, which is something that we support.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by the hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

Nina Louise Courtepatte

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The horrific story of Nina Louise Courtepatte is an example of the dangers when Alberta Children's Services fails at its job. Despite numerous calls by child intervention services regarding claims of abuse and even a full investigation into the family, Nina stayed in an unsupportive home and barely attended school, and the calls kept coming. To the Minister of Children's Services: why did the system let this girl fall through the cracks when there were so many reports of problems to Children's Services?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to make it very clear, first of all, that this matter is before the courts, and it's in respect to a criminal investigation. I will say, though, that the death of Nina was very, very tragic, and my heart goes out to her family.

I can say, Mr. Speaker, that the social workers in this province do an unbelievable job in very, very difficult situations. The families that we're dealing with on a daily basis come to us with horrific problems, and the number one priority for the social workers in this province is always the best interest of the child.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: given that the history of this case until it was closed involved many investigations and calls to Children's Services alleging horrific levels of abuse and neglect, what were the criteria for closing this case last year?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, again, Mr. Speaker, we're talking about an individual case that's before the courts, and I certainly don't want to jeopardize that particular investigation.

I can tell the hon. member that when our social workers are dealing with families, they always try to make a decision in the best interest of the child. Believe it or not, most children want to be with their parents no matter how difficult the situation is at the home. What we do is continually investigate what we're hearing about. We will try and make a decision. We'll provide supports for the family, whether it's alcohol or drug counselling, whether it's any sort of

family support we can. When that isn't working, we will apprehend the child, put them in foster care, and if need be, go right into a permanent guardianship.

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you. To the same minister: will the minister give Albertans peace of mind and perhaps some confidence in the child welfare system by having a fatality inquiry review into Nina's death to find out where and why things went wrong?

Mrs. Forsyth: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, it's a criminal investigation.

I can tell the hon. member, though, the commitment from this minister: any time a child dies in our care or is injured in our care, we do an internal review. We will be doing an internal review on this case and others. One of the things that bothers me as Minister of Children's Services is the amount of screenings that we have to do, the amount of apprehensions. I think it's important to find out what is in the best interest of a child. The fatality inquiry is something that is decided by the Justice minister, and he may want to supplement the answer.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Airport Rental Costs

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the end of the 1980s Canada's airports were rundown relics that were costing the federal government millions of dollars to operate and had a book value of one and a half billion dollars. These airports have since been turned over to community-run authorities such as Edmonton and Calgary on a lease basis. Rents paid to date have exceeded over \$2 billion. These airports have been transformed into world-class facilities at no cost to the federal government, yet the rents have escalated drastically over the past 10 years and were forecast to go even higher. A recent announcement by the Minister of Transport suggests that he'll be reducing the rents to the authorities like Edmonton and Calgary. My question is for the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation. What effect will these rent reductions have on the viability of airports in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'd say at the outset that this is one of the most horrific spins I've ever seen put on a story from Ottawa. They're putting it across as a rent reduction when, in actual fact, they're just not increasing the rent. The rent was destined to go up at the Edmonton airport from \$4.3 million to \$22 million. In Calgary it was from \$25 million to \$50 million. Then they had the audacity to come out and say that they were actually reducing rent when they were just leaving it at the same level. First of all, it's great they're leaving it at the same level, but on the other hand the spin that was put on this story was absolutely horrific.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental is to the same minister. Mr. Minister, what are you doing to get airport rents reduced or even eliminated, as they should be?

Dr. Oberg: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member makes an excellent point. In his preamble to his first question he stated that the \$1.5 billion book value was what the airports were actually worth when they were transferred. They have paid to this date \$2 billion in rent. So I think there's a very good case to be made that these airports should be turned over to the airport authorities free of charge. The federal government has gone from it costing them \$225 million per year to making close to \$200 million per year, a swing of \$400 million. They're using our airports as a cash cow.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final supplemental to the minister: what is his department doing to support the aviation sector in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Although I may have been strong in my statements that I made in my first two answers, those were actually the words that I used in the Standing Committee on Aviation, which I presented to approximately a month ago. I feel very strongly about this. Those \$25 million and \$4.3 million are fees that are going to be transferred to you and I as the people who use the airports. I think that they should do the right thing. They should turn them fully over to the airport authorities in exactly the same way as this government did to the other 72 airport authorities without collecting a cent of rent. I think the time is here.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Environmental Protection

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Energy and Utilities Board will soon rule on Compton Petroleum's application to drill six critical sour gas wells near southeast Calgary based on a reduced emergency planning zone of four kilometres. Many Calgarians are understandably upset about this development. Compton has assured everyone, however, that it can ignite the well within 15 minutes of any blowout to burn off deadly hydrogen sulphide, but even the most sophisticated system can fail, as it did this year in Pincher Creek. To the Minister of Energy: with the reduced emergency planning zone can the minister be certain that 250,000 Calgarians would be protected from a sour gas release in the event of a blowout?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Melchin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to point out that the Energy and Utilities Board's first priority is the public safety of Albertans. No applications go forward before them without having been vetted. That's why there are hearings. That's why the issue of whether they can safely manage a substance like sour gas is paramount to the decision. That's before the Energy and Utilities Board at this stage. We have full confidence in them. They have set some of the most stringent regulations, really, in the world for managing sour gas.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the Energy minister: when will the government begin to do cumulative impact assessments before approvals to enable more appropriate decisions in the public interest?

Mr. Melchin: Mr. Speaker, the body of information before the Energy and Utilities Board is quite cumulative in the sense that we've had over 50 years of safely managing sour gas in this province. There is a tremendous amount of literature, both science and research, that has been compiled on managing sour gas, and it's upon those standards that the regulations have been based so that we can ensure that we can manage it safely going forward.

One of their recommendations also out of a study that they did earlier in the year 2000 came up with 87 recommendations, and at the forefront of that was an area on health effects and sour gas research. It still continues to be one of the main focuses of the Energy and Utilities Board.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Dr. Swann: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the agriculture minister: in relation to coal-bed methane will the minister agree to meet with landowners, farmers, and concerned citizens about the agricultural impacts of coal-bed methane, the water impacts, the land evaluation issues associated with the planned 50,000 new coal-bed methane wells in south-central Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development may choose to, but the tradition basically is one question, two supplementals on the same subject. This is totally unrelated.

Mr. Horner: Well, Mr. Speaker, there are a number of questions in there that I suppose I could answer, but I guess the general one is whether I would be prepared to meet with industry groups, farm groups, producer groups to discuss integrated land management or issues around the environment. I do that every week and would be more than pleased to do that with any of those interested groups at any time that we can mutually arrange a schedule.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar. [some applause]

Long-term Care Facility Standards

(continued)

Mr. Martin: Don't make me stand too long. That's the only time I've ever had that reaction, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General's findings show that basic standards for long-term care are badly out of date. Less than 1 out of 3 facilities even meets the outdated standards, and the so-called inspections to monitor compliance are frankly a joke. There are 14,000 beds across the province, and it's estimated that 4,000 people are not even having their basic needs met, all this in a province that has posted multibillion dollar surpluses year after year. My question is to the Premier. Given that the Department of Health and Wellness has known about the Auditor General's devastating findings for months, what is the government's lame excuse for not having already taken decisive action to fix the crisis in long-term care?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, there is no such thing as a lame excuse. The only lame excuse is sitting over there. Well, standing now.

Mr. Speaker, as I indicated, both the Minister of Health and Wellness and the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports are taking action and have been taking action. It's always been the intention of this government to ensure that those who reside in long-

term care centres receive the respect and dignity that they deserve, and we plan to make sure that that continues to happen.

2:20

Mr. Martin: Well, we've had lame excuses, and now we've had lame answers, Mr. Speaker.

Given that seniors' advocates and seniors' families have for years told this government that long-term care was in turmoil, why did the government fail to provide the necessary resources in last month's provincial budget to enhance staffing standards and keep the frail and the elderly and the chronically ill safe and well cared for?

Mr. Klein: Mr. Speaker, I don't know exactly what the budget was before, but I know that 15 million additional dollars were added to that budget in targeted areas to increase long-term care staff numbers. That's \$15 million for that project alone.

Mr. Speaker, relative to the overall program I will have the hon. minister respond.

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know that the hon. member has mentioned years and years of what has happened in long-term care, but I can tell you this: we're moving forward from today. You know, we've been moving forward with the business plan, with the allocation, as the Premier mentioned, of \$15 million in the budget through Treasury and also \$2 million into the seniors' budget for the implementation of standards. As I mentioned before, we've met with the organizations that are involved in long-term care, and I mean involved at the industry level. There are industry standards in place, the regional health authorities have standards, and the Minister of Health and Wellness and myself are working together on those standards.

Mr. Martin: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think it's frankly outrageous that they're saying that they're moving forward from today when almost everybody in Alberta knew the problems.

My question again to the minister then. They're saying that they're going to talk and deal with it in September. Why is the government taking its own sweet time coming up with an action plan to fix long-term care? I mentioned that there are probably 4,000 people . . .

The Speaker: Okay. The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I mentioned earlier as well, it does take time. [interjections]

The Speaker: I wish everybody would talk through the chair. It'd be much more civil.

Mrs. Fritz: Mr. Speaker, it does take time to put standards in place. The reason why this is so important is because in the community we have a continuum of care that has developed over the past five years for designated assisted living, and that's in the whole supportive living component of long-term care. That's why standards are critical, that they will also arch to cover those as well.

When I say "from today," I mean with the Auditor General's report. I also indicated to you, hon. member, that it's been in the business plan since January.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmor, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Federal Financial Support

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions today are for the Minister of international and intergovernmental affairs. It seems that Christmas has come early for some provinces. Over the weekend the federal and Ontario governments concluded a hastily crafted deal to transfer \$5.7 billion to Ontario over the next five years in an attempt to address what Ontario calls the growing gap between what they contribute to Canada and what they receive in services. Given that Albertans contribute more to Canada on a per capita basis than residents of Ontario, could the minister say whether Alberta is being treated fairly by this Kris Kringle federal Liberal government, or should we just expect another lump of coal in our stockings?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Stelmach: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year Albertans contributed more than \$9.3 billion more to Ottawa than what they got back, which is about \$2,900 per Albertan, far more than any other province in Canada.

With respect to closing the gap and Ontario pursuing that with the Prime Minister, who happens to be in a very giving mood at this particular time, we can't give judgment on the agreement until we have a good look at it and assess it, but we will pursue with Ontario those areas where they seem to be gaining on some of the long-standing issues.

We have some success, Mr. Speaker. We recently did sign a labour development agreement with Ottawa, and we're going to get back about \$110 million of our money.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplemental to the same minister: given that Albertans would rather just keep their own money, can Alberta use this opportunity to negotiate a federal tax reduction instead of more provincial handouts?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, that's not within provincial jurisdiction. However, our position is that taxation in this country should be fair, it should be consistent, and it should be equitable and represent all Canadians no matter what part of Canada they live in.

Rev. Abbott: My final supplemental, Mr. Speaker: how can Albertans know if we are being treated fairly when every week the federal government announces a new bilateral agreement to spend on programs in a vote-rich region when those that pay the freight are not even at the table?

Mr. Stelmach: Mr. Speaker, we are at the table at every opportunity, and when we're at the table, we make sure that the values and the interests of Albertans are represented.

With respect to the agreements that we were talking about this afternoon – one, for instance, the child care agreement – our Minister of Children's Services will not sign an agreement that will put provincial jurisdiction at risk or question the value and the interests of Alberta parents making choice into how to raise their children. We're not going to give that up for a few pennies that Ottawa may offer us.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore, followed by the hon. Member for Peace River.

Bison Grazing on Agricultural Public Land

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Every year this government pays out millions of dollars in compensation to the holders of leases on Crown lands, even though the government is entrusted to manage all the public lands on behalf of all Albertans. Recently they announced that they will allow bison ranchers to lease Crown land for grazing, meaning more of the public's money will be dished out to the holders of these leases. My question to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development: are the surface rights to oil and gas exploration and other developments that apply to farmers who lease public lands also going to apply to bison ranchers who lease Crown lands?

An Hon. Member: I bet you saw that one coming.

Mr. Coutts: I think it was in the paper yesterday.

Well, Mr. Speaker, legislation to allow bison ranching on agricultural public land – and it's agricultural public land we're talking about, and that's different than what the question was – was passed in this House in December of 2003. Since then, we've had two years of consultation, and in addition to that we've had scientific input and a multistakeholder group put together to show that bison grazing on the land is no different than cows grazing on the land as well. The same kinds of fees that apply to grass under an agricultural disposition apply to a bison disposition.

Mr. Bonko: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: why was the public consultation limited to industry with all other interested parties excluded to determine the extended grazing leases to the bison ranches on Crown land? Is it in the public's best interest? Remember that this is public land and not the government's land.

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, what we've done in the consultation is made sure that bison on agricultural land will be treated the same way as agricultural products such as cows, et cetera. When we have an opportunity where there might be an ongoing risk, say, from cattle and bison on any pasture mixed in with people, mixed in with elk or something like that, we have agricultural and public land inspectors that go out there to make sure that everything works well. In addition to that, we also have put into place permeable fencing to make sure that the wildlife can get back and forth. So there's nothing wrong with bison being on public land.

2:30

Mr. Bonko: Mr. Speaker, given that millions of dollars are given out to the holders of leases on Crown land every year, can this minister explain why this money is not held in public trust and reinvested in Alberta?

Mr. Coutts: Well, Mr. Speaker, we would have to make sure that the hon. member understands that exactly the same dispositions that handle agricultural dispositions are also handled on leases that would hold bison. It was a two-year consultation. I'm really not quite sure where he's coming from, but exactly the same rules apply to both species on the same landscape. We make sure that wildlife have the protection of going back and forth. For us it makes a good fit to have the bison back on the land that they occupied 50,000 years ago.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Forest Fires

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the last several years Alberta has been severely impacted by forest fires. In the forested regions of the province people are concerned, first, for the safety of

their communities and, secondly, for the economic loss of harvestable timber. My first question is for the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Can the minister inform us what the outlook is for the coming forest fire season?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Coutts: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Despite wet conditions that were there last year, the Department of Sustainable Resource Development fought 1,600 fires that destroyed over 230,000 hectares of forest. This year we've had good precipitation over the winter and through this early spring, and we're thankful that this year it's been a slow start to the season. But conditions can change very quickly in this province, and sometimes in five days we can go from a low risk to a high hazard in the forest. We're constantly monitoring the fire hazard conditions in our 122 lookout towers throughout the province, and we do that on a daily basis when we're at high-risk season.

Through fire science and continual improvement to detection monitoring, so far this year, Mr. Speaker, we have 304 fires that have only consumed 1,300 hectares. The only thing we can do is pray for rain and wet conditions this year to help us.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister. To the same minister. Can he inform this House as to how prepared Alberta is for the coming wildfire season, especially if this season turns out to be as severe as those we've seen in recent years?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, it's a good question. Not knowing whether or not we're going to have a severe or warm summer, our resources are strategically positioned so that they can be moved to wherever the hazard is the highest. Our Hinton Training Centre provides state-of-the-art programs for training our firefighters. In addition, we have a fire protection centre with minute-to-minute weather reporting. What it does is track weather systems with the potential of lightning strikes as they come across the Rockies so we have an idea of where it's going to strike. In addition, Albertans can call our fire line at 310-FIRE 24 hours a day to report forest fires. As well, communities also work with our forestry industry and our department to do forest protection in their communities.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Oberle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Final question to the same minister: what are we doing to ensure that the economic loss from forest fires is kept to a minimum?

Mr. Coutts: Well, Mr. Speaker, we have a very good system in place to make sure that all wood from forest fires that is salvageable can be salvaged and can be used efficiently. We also work with companies to make sure that we're looking at new technology and new ways within their harvesting plans to make sure that the wood is harvested and kept. In addition, we also contribute to ongoing research to find new ways to use fire-killed timber in value-added products that may come from that and find new markets for that.

All in all, in many forests in Alberta because of the fire, even though they can naturally regenerate themselves, we find that we're looking at other approaches through the burnt areas to maybe look at calling them disaster areas so that we can reforest them in the future and make them sustainable for future generations.

The Clerk: Members' Statements.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in a few seconds from now I'll call upon the first of six hon. members to participate. Might we, however, revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(*reversion*)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to this Assembly Ireen Slater. Ireen is currently the vice-president of the Seniors United Now central chapter. Ireen is the recipient of many awards for her tireless work in the community, including the United Nations International Women's Day award for exemplary service. I would ask that she rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview has one as well, but he's not as fast on his feet as me.

The Speaker: Please proceed.

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the Assembly members of the Elder Advocates of Alberta Society. This organization is comprised of advocates on behalf of the frail, dependent, and elderly in our society. The Elder Advocates of Alberta Society is here today to show their concern for seniors in long-term care facilities. I would ask that each member rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly as I call out their names: Irene Stein, Anne Pavelich, Eva Makowichuk, Elaine Fleming, Louis Adria, and Ruth Maria Adria. Please give them the warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Ms Calahasen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. When I introduced my people earlier, they weren't in the building; however, they are now. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly 12 members who are sitting in the members' gallery. They are students from Northern Lakes College, the High Prairie campus, and they're seated over there, as you can see. They're here with their bus driver, Jim Meldrum, as well as Chris Neidig, their teacher. I'd ask that they all rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: **Members' Statements**

The Speaker: The Member for Calgary-Bow.

A Tribute to Fathers

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps one of the oldest and most enduring symbols of ancient Chinese philosophy is the yin and the yang, which represents the Chinese understanding of how things work. According to the Yellow Emperor, the yin-yang underlies everything in creation, and it brings about the development of parenthood. According to this philosophy, children are most complete when raised by the love of both mother and father. Many centuries later Sigmund Freud said: "I cannot think of

any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father's protection."

Now, this past weekend we had the opportunity to pay tribute to mothers, and since we most likely will not be sitting during Father's Day, I have risen today to say happy Father's Day to the fathers in the province.

In Alberta we place the utmost importance on the family as a pillar of our society, and I believe we can attribute much of our collective success on this. I, myself, have been twice blessed, first with an actively involved father and then blessed again with a husband actively involved in the raising of our children. Both mother and father play a critical role in the proper development of a child as each can offer different strengths and a different approach to the world. By putting together the teachings of mom and the teachings of dad, we raise children who are well rounded and who are whole.

Today study after study shows that the best thing for the proper development of children is access to both parents. The love and attention of a father is just as important as that of a mother. Science tells us now what Freud told us at the beginning of the century and what ancient Chinese philosophy told us centuries ago: children grow up whole with the love of a mother, yin, and a father, yang. Happy Father's Day.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace.

U of A and Northern Lakes College Partnership

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In the fall of this year as Alberta's postsecondary students head back to the classroom, there will be a new program available which is significant to Alberta's aboriginal students attending Northern Lakes College, based out of Slave Lake. It's really appropriate to see guests in the members' gallery as I say this.

I am proud to acknowledge that on May 3 in Slave Lake as part of the Campus Alberta initiative, Northern Lakes College and the University of Alberta signed a memorandum of understanding. This was witnessed by our hon. Minister of Advanced Education.

2:40

The spirit of this partnership is to increase quality postsecondary education access for Alberta's aboriginal students through a two-year transition program from Northern Lakes College campuses to the University of Alberta. This transition program celebrates aboriginal values and culture while empowering students with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to succeed in a University of Alberta undergrad program. Northern Lakes College students participating in the transition program will also gain the necessary academic requirements and transfer courses for admission to the University of Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, this is another example of Alberta's passion to offer innovative education solutions to all Albertans, ensuring that each and every student is given the tools necessary to accomplish their life's goals and achieve the success they deserve.

I think it is important for all hon. members to recognize the commitment government has to postsecondary education, this province, and the people who wish to benefit from the advantage that being an Albertan offers. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul.

U of A and Keyano College Partnership

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak in support of an agreement signed today by the University of Alberta

and Keyano College. I had the honour of attending the ceremony in Fort McMurray this morning along with the hon. ministers of Advanced Education, Environment, and Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development and a large group of University of Alberta and Keyano College officials. It was a great opportunity to see firsthand the enthusiasm and excitement from all those involved in the partnership.

The agreement signed today will form the basis of a long-term working relationship between the University of Alberta and Keyano College, a partnership that will be of great benefit to the people of Fort McMurray and all of northern Alberta. The agreement will help open doors for students in Fort McMurray and the surrounding area by helping aboriginals gain the skills and academic knowledge they need to qualify for university admission, and the agreement will also allow Keyano College students to continue studying towards University of Alberta degrees longer without having to leave Fort McMurray.

Skilled workers are also needed more and more in the north to take advantage of the massive investments pouring into the oil sands and other areas. It will also help students get postsecondary education right where they live, which is so important to the continued health and strength of northern communities.

The University of Alberta has shown impressive leadership in recent months in supporting education for Albertans in rural and remote areas by signing agreements with postsecondary institutions such as the Northern Lakes College in Slave Lake, NorQuest College in Edmonton, and Olds College. Keyano College has equally demonstrated a real spirit of innovation and readiness to help address the challenges facing northern Alberta, and the college deserves to be commended.

Mr. Speaker, the efforts of both Keyano College and the University of Alberta will go a long way towards ensuring that Alberta's postsecondary system remains second to none. Thank you very much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Long-term Care in Whitecourt-Ste. Anne

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A lot of discussion lately in the House has been focused on seniors' care and the conditions in our seniors' facilities. Last week in Mayerthorpe I talked to the director of the Mayerthorpe extended care facility. This facility was just part of an unannounced inspection by the Health Facilities Review Committee, chaired by the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat. The director explained to me that the facility rated very high and that little concern was raised by the inspectors. I know many staff members that work in the various facilities in my constituency. They love their work, they're dedicated, they're caring, and the atmosphere in which they work shows all of that.

A few weeks previous to this I was in another health care facility in Mayerthorpe to present to Mrs. Dubois a centennial medal to recognize her 101st birthday. This party was attended by staff and residents as well as many family members. Again, Mr. Speaker, I noticed a very well-maintained facility staffed, once again, by caring, loving, and hard-working individuals.

I know we can always improve the care and the quality of seniors' facilities in our great province, and I, for one, do not accept the status quo in anything. I feel that it is very important to let the citizens of Alberta know that we do have some of the finest seniors' facilities that I have ever seen.

Mr. Speaker, I have complete confidence in our facilities in Whitecourt-Ste. Anne. The residents are safe and well cared for. I'll

continue to strive for dollars that may be required to make improvements and expansions to the facilities in my constituency.

I want to thank the staff and the residents for always welcoming me and treating me so well during my visits. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Nursing Week

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Nurses across the province are celebrating National Nursing Week from May 9 to 15. This year's theme is Nursing: Patients First, Safety Always. I would like to take this opportunity to honour the contribution nurses make to the Alberta health system.

More than 27,000 registered nurses are currently employed in Alberta, providing quality care to patients across our province. Every minute of every day these nurses help those who cannot help themselves as well as promoting the health and wellness of those who can.

However, workloads for nurses are steadily increasing due to the new challenges they face as the population ages. Workplace injury is comparatively high in nursing professions, yet research shows that with more nurses per patient there are lower rates of mortality, decreased instances of hospital readmission, and fewer complications reported. Despite the new challenges faced by these health professionals today, every nurse in this province upholds his or her commitment to patients and ensures that each and every patient receives the quality care he or she needs.

This commitment to putting patients ahead of all else requires a health system that focuses not just on costs of the care provided but on the quality of care provided. Nurses across this province are intent on fostering a sustainable health system which invests more energy to helping people stay well. This can be achieved if the government will begin working together with the health professionals to ensure that their needs are met.

The purpose of National Nursing Week is to increase awareness of the importance nursing holds to the well-being of all Canadians. Mr. Speaker, I know that I'm not alone in stating that nursing is one of our province's most valuable professions. We should all be proud of the 27,000 registered nurses along with the many licensed practical nurses at their side who provide the best possible care to their patients. I ask all members of this Legislature to celebrate National Nursing Week with me.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Boreal Forest

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Canada's boreal forest covers nearly 11 per cent of our planet's total surface and is the largest terrestrial ecosystem on Earth. Every day it filters tens of millions of litres of water, rebuilds soils, stores carbon, and provides food and shelter. Our boreal forest is one of the largest tracts of wilderness in the world.

However, there are major disruptions in this ecosystem here in the province of Alberta. Eighty nine per cent of Alberta's boreal forest is unprotected from exploitation. A 2003 study of the Alberta-Pacific forestry management area showed that old-growth forest of spruce and pine will disappear within 20 years in this province. Old-growth aspen will disappear within 65 years. Habitat for woodland caribou, a threatened species, will shrink from 43 per cent of its area to a mere 6 per cent over these coming decades.

This year the Sierra Club found that Alberta was rated as poor on 10 indicators of good forestry management practices including habitat protection and old-growth forest preservation. Renowned water scientist David Schindler describes Alberta's northern wilderness as starting to, quote, look like Dresden after the bombing of the Second World War, unquote. When one looks at the time-lapse aerial photographs of the Swan Hills region or looks at satellite imagery of areas around Grande Cache or Hinton, one can see that Schindler is not exaggerating. The disruptions are enormous. This rate of destruction cannot continue. It is simply unsustainable.

I implore this government to look at the potential of ecotourism in an effort to preserve the boreal forest. No tourist wants their wilderness experience interrupted by clear-cuts and seismic lines. No one wants to navigate a patchwork of fragmented forests. Science, economics, and common sense are on the side of immediate action. Future generations deserve nothing less.

Thank you.

Vignettes from Alberta's History

The Speaker: Hon. members, if I could take you back to May 10, 1988, on this day Bill 1, the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities Act, passed through Committee of the Whole. The bill would eventually create a council that would work on behalf of Alberta's disabled, and today the council remains active in the province. It is currently served by 15 volunteer board members who represent various regions of the province and pursue the goal of full citizenship for all Albertans regardless of their age or type of disability.

head: 2:50

Presenting Petitions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have 103 signatures on here that urge the Alberta Legislature and the government to "declare the Grizzly bear an endangered species in accordance with the recommendations made by the Endangered Species Conservation Committee, scientists and other wild life experts."

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to present a petition from the good Alberta residents of Leduc, Devon, Millet, Ardrossan, Hinton, Fort Saskatchewan, and the cultural capital of western Canada, the river city of Edmonton. It reads:

We the undersigned residents of Alberta, petition the Legislative Assembly to urge the Government of Alberta to prohibit the importation of temporary foreign workers to work on the construction and/or maintenance of oil sands facilities and/or pipelines until the following groups have been accessed and/or trained: Unemployed Albertans and Canadians; Aboriginals; unemployed youth under 25; under-employed landed immigrants; and displaced farmers.

There are 103 on this particular petition.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora.

Dr. B. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also have a petition from many residents in Edmonton, including my constituency, who are urging the government to

prohibit the importation of temporary foreign workers to work on the construction and/or maintenance of oil sands facilities and/or pipelines until the following groups have been accessed and/or

trained: Unemployed Albertans and Canadians; Aboriginals; unemployed youth under 25; under-employed landed immigrants; and displaced farmers.

head:

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Pursuant to Standing Order 30 and after having provided your office with the appropriate notice, I wish to inform you that upon the completion of the daily Routine I will move to adjourn the ordinary business of the Assembly to hold an emergency debate on a matter of urgent public importance; namely, the ongoing suffering of residents of long-term care facilities in Alberta as identified by the May 2005 report from the Auditor General.

head:

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Advanced Education.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am tabling today the required number of copies of responses to questions raised during the Committee of Supply in consideration of the estimates of the Department of Advanced Education.

The Speaker: Others? The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I'm tabling five copies of a petition signed by 62 Albertans urging the Alberta government to "provide adequate funding for our local ambulance services."

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the requisite five copies of four letters from some good Albertans speaking to the apprenticeship ratios in the province and the deskilling of the workplace as well as foreign replacement workers.

head:

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk on behalf of the hon. Mr. Renner, Minister of Municipal Affairs, pursuant to the Special Areas Act: the special areas trust account financial statements, December 31, 2004.

head:

Emergency Debate

Long-term Care Facility Standards

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood on a Standing Order 30 application.

Mr. Mason: Yes. Mr. Speaker, I would move that the ordinary business of the Assembly be adjourned in order to hold an emergency debate on a matter of urgent public importance; namely, the ongoing suffering of residents of long-term care facilities in Alberta as identified by the May 2005 report of the Auditor General.

If I may speak to the urgency on that, Mr. Speaker, the Assembly only received the Auditor General's report yesterday, but we have heard from the government that it may be some months, in fact in the fall, before they are finally able to present an action plan to address the Auditor General's concerns. The most compelling

reason for immediately debating long-term care is the indisputable fact that Albertans are suffering and are even in life-endangering situations. The report found that only seven of 25 facilities visited fully met even the basic standards; that is, about 30 per cent of facilities. With 14,000 beds across the province more than 4,000 residents are likely to be in facilities where their basic needs are not currently being met. For residents who are not having their basic needs met, the urgency of this debate is obvious.

Of utmost and immediate concern is the staffing shortages and the problems that flow from these shortages. Most urgent is the Auditor General's finding of improper provision of medication, something that was brought up frequently in our health care hearings. The implication, of course, is that right now, as we speak, seniors may in fact be receiving overdoses of medication or the wrong medication. The very fact that they are in long-term care facilities implies that their health is not at its best, and they are therefore more vulnerable to the ill effects of improper medical interventions.

The NDP opposition is calling on the ministers responsible to develop an action plan to address these concerns, and we are proposing that such a plan be tabled before the end of this sitting. The Assembly cannot however be content to simply delegate this task. Conditions in long-term care facilities have been Alberta's secret for too long. It's time for the Assembly to own up to its responsibilities and seriously consider options for resolving the crisis.

Mr. Speaker, there are thousands of family members wondering whether their loved ones are in fact receiving proper care. However, basic standards are not readily available to the public, authorities are not required to undertake annual inspection, and we are talking about an extremely vulnerable portion of our population, who quite often depend on others for financial and physical support. Family members deserve to know what standards are in place and should be empowered to hold facilities accountable for the care received by their loved ones.

So I think, Mr. Speaker, that it's of utmost urgency that the Assembly debate this matter and provide direction to the government to develop an action plan which will deal immediately with this crisis, before the end of this sitting. We now have proof of what has long been suggested with respect to health care. We don't believe there could be anything more urgent than the well-being of Alberta's frail, elderly, and chronically ill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Nothing could be more important than the care of seniors in long-term care, than making sure that the elderly in this province, particularly those that are vulnerable, have appropriate care. Nothing could be more important than that, and no one would dispute that, I don't believe. In fact, the report of the Auditor General tabled yesterday is an important report.

The question for Standing Order 30 is whether or not it's urgent to adjourn the normal course of business for this afternoon and discuss the motion being put forward, and that is "to discuss a matter of urgent public importance; namely, the ongoing suffering of residents in long-term care facilities in Alberta as identified by the May 2005 report."

Mr. Speaker, even on the face of the notice of motion I would say that the issue of urgency is improperly framed. First of all, I will indicate that I haven't had the opportunity to read through the report in detail, but I have skimmed the report. I have looked at reviews of the report. I don't believe that the report indicates that there's ongoing suffering of residents in long-term care facilities in Alberta,

nor do I think that the report says that the long-term care system is in crisis.

What the report basically says is that there are basic standards that in some cases haven't been met, that there is work to be done in developing policy, that there are processes that need to be undertaken. That's, in fact, what Auditor General's reports do. They examine processes. They determine whether policies have been complied with. It looks to see whether or not the things that were supposed to have been done have been done and whether there are processes in place to ensure that that happens.

The Auditor General has found some areas that need some improvement. In fact, as we look through the Auditor General's report, it clearly indicates that the Department of Health and Wellness, the Minister of Health and Wellness, and the Department of Seniors and Community Supports through the minister of that department have agreed with virtually all of the recommendations and agreed in principle with a couple of the other recommendations. In fact, we heard in the House today and I'm sure yesterday indications that there is work ongoing on all of the areas that have been recommended.

In fact, when the Auditor General indicates that some of the institutions in the province aren't meeting the basic guidelines, that does not equate to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood's statement that basic needs of seniors are not currently being met. That is not the same statement, Mr. Speaker. To raise the level of what we're talking about here to crisis proportions or to make statements that the basic needs of seniors are not being met is entirely inappropriate.

3:00

The Auditor General's report is an important report. The care of seniors is a very important topic. The fact is that we must make sure that both the Department of Health and Wellness and the Department of Seniors and Community Supports take a look at the recommendations in those reports, work through the MLA committee that's been established on healthy aging in continuing care in Alberta, the Implementation Advisory Committee, make sure that the long-term care committee – and the chair of the Social Care Facilities Review Committee is a member of this Legislature and, in fact, is having meetings this very afternoon on the topic.

There are ongoing matters taking place, Mr. Speaker, but the question we have to deal with today as a result of this notice of motion is: is it urgent to suspend the normal business of the House, in this case the examination of the estimates in the Department of the Solicitor General, to debate what has been characterized as "the ongoing suffering of residents in long-term care facilities . . . as identified by the May 2005 report of the Auditor General"?

Mr. Speaker, as I've said, the Auditor General's report doesn't identify the suffering as the hon. member has said. It doesn't indicate that there's a crisis in long-term care. It does indicate that there are a number of very important issues that have to be dealt with. Those issues do have to be dealt with, and the ministers responsible have indicated that they will. For example, the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports this afternoon indicated that \$200,000 – I believe I heard that from her this afternoon – was provided to the Alberta Senior Citizens Housing Association and Long Term Care Association to help update the accommodation standards and accountability mechanisms, to help update the very standards that the Auditor General was talking about.

The work is in progress. It's not a new thing. It's something that's ongoing. It's work that's being done. It's work that's being done in public. It's work that every member of the public, every stakeholder, every family member who has a concern can be

involved with, ought to be involved with because there's no more important work.

Is it urgent today that we adjourn the normal business of the House, not review the estimates of the Department of the Solicitor General but, instead, debate "the ongoing suffering of residents in long-term care . . . as identified by the May 2005 report"? No, Mr. Speaker. That's not an appropriate thing for us to be doing this afternoon.

We need to look at the report in detail. We need to have the ministers deal with the issues and the recommendations, as they've agreed to accept those recommendations, to implement the reviews that they've indicated they are proceeding with. The framework is already under development in which government is responsible for establishing and monitoring compliance with basic standards. Industry organizations are responsible for promoting quality improvements in excellence. The role of Seniors and Community Supports is to ensure compliance with basic standards and promote resident safety. So work is being done. The work is ongoing.

The issues that have been identified by the Auditor General are important. They're not new, but they are important. That work has to be undertaken, but it's not urgent, in the words that have been put forward by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood in terms of there being a crisis. The Auditor General didn't say that there was a crisis. In terms of basic needs not being met, the Auditor General didn't say that basic needs are not being met. He did say that there were important systems that needed to be put in place, important processes that hadn't been reviewed on a timely basis that needed to be reviewed. That work is undertaken and ongoing.

The Speaker: The hon. Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you very much for the opportunity to speak in support of the Standing Order 30 that's moved by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. I would echo the comments of the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood in underlining how important the health and safety of our seniors is and noting that, indeed, many of the veterans that we honoured just the other day are among those who are experiencing some risk to their health and safety. What the Auditor General talks about is, in fact, risk, and he very clearly outlines that.

Now, that may not be happening in every case, but the entire argument about risk is that it could be happening, and it may well be happening. It may not happen in every instance, but it certainly can be happening, indeed, and that's what he is pointing out to us. So there is an argument about the health and safety of the seniors on a daily basis.

Mr. Speaker, I would argue that day by day is a very long measurement of time for someone that is subjected to physical restraint that has not been prescribed for them by a physician or a chemical restraint that's being used. I would argue that a day or two days, but in this case a day, is a very long time if a special diet is not being adhered to. Time is of the essence if we are to be giving an opportunity for an airing of the issues and for some advocacy for some faster resolutions of these problems than what has been offered by the government, who are giving us, according to what we heard today, some vague reassurances of "well, in the fall" and "maybe another committee." That is not of any assistance to those who are experiencing some of the difficulties that I have outlined: health, safety, restraints, medication, diet, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, the staff of at least one care centre in Alberta has been without a contract for years, and the staff are considering strike action over budgets, staffing, and working conditions, exactly what

we're talking about. They are delaying such action on the hopes that government may provide leadership and the resources required. This care centre is not alone in being in a strike position. An emergency debate today would send a strong signal to those very staff across the province that help might be on the way. Being unable to fulfill that will send them a different signal.

Mr. Speaker, I would argue that Oral Question Period, with a 45-second exchange, is not the proper forum to discuss an issue of such breadth and severity. In particular, hearing the Premier's as well as the minister of seniors' answers to the questions that were asked today, I would argue that their answers were not sufficient to allay the concerns and to address the risks that have been outlined in the Auditor General's report.

This Legislative Assembly is expected to rise within a few days, likely next week. That doesn't give us very much time to be able to give a full airing to the concerns here and to hear the government's plans for addressing those risks. I would argue that that brings some urgency to the matter as well.

The hon. House leader had raised some issues about: well, nothing was specifically detailed that was a health or a safety risk. If I may point out, in fact, in the same report he was referring to, on page 74, it's noted that some facilities had problems meeting therapeutic and special diets: "the required consistency of some diets, and physician orders for special diets were not sufficiently documented" in some cases. For people that are requiring a special diet – diabetics come to mind very quickly, or those with swallowing problems, for example – I would argue that a day's delay is pretty urgent for them, Mr. Speaker.

In addition, on page 75 I note the section under Medication to Residents, and he does specifically outline significant safety risks. That appears on page 75 of the Auditor General's report, Mr. Speaker. He's outlining "inconsistent documentation of the effectiveness and . . . affects of medication therapies, particularly relative to pain control and chemical restraint." I would argue that chemical restraint should be rarely used, from everything that I've read, and continued use of chemical restraint, given that we're not able to resolve these, is of some urgency indeed and does in fact constitute significant safety risks to the patients that are involved. I would also argue that poor pain control or inconsistent pain control would also bring some urgency to this debate.

In addition, there is "inconsistent control over phone orders signed off by physicians" and "insufficient or untimely notification of physicians or pharmacists following medication errors." Again, I would argue that there is an urgency to this. Those are a few examples of the safety risks that have been raised specifically by the Auditor General which I argue require immediate attention by the members of this Assembly.

3:10

I note with interest that the fatality inquiry for the family of Jennie Nelson is occurring sometime this week. I believe that a discussion and some specific plans coming out of this Assembly would be of great interest to that family and perhaps resolve some of the difficulties that they have faced around their mother's demise.

So we have a number of situations that are constituting this mix today, Mr. Speaker. I would argue that lives are at stake. At the very least they are at risk of inadequate or improper medication, use of chemical or physical restraints that are not appropriate, and additionally some concerns around proper diet being administered. We have workers that are in a strike position. That gives us some urgency. We have patients going on hunger strikes in the province. Again, that gives us some impetus. One woman, in particular, who was 86 felt strongly enough that she went on a hunger strike. I

would add that the rest of the families of Albertans are looking to the Assembly for immediate answers. I don't think they see a six-month wait time when these risks are proposed as being adequate.

With those arguments I will support the Standing Order 30 as proposed by the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood and urge all members of the Assembly to support the Standing Order 30 should the case for urgency be ruled favourably by the Speaker. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, under Standing Order 30 the rules permit the Speaker to allow such debate as he considers relevant to the question of urgency, so just give me some idea as to how many additional members would like to participate. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview would. Are there other members who would like to? The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka. The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity. So if I heard three additional arguments, would you all consider that to be fair?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I won't take long, but I want to refer basically to a couple of matters and specifically to comments from the Government House Leader. What was amazing to me when we raised these questions before – we raised it with the Premier and others. They said that there was no problem. It's like they didn't even realize that the Auditor General was going to come out with this, and this problem has been going on for years and years and years.

Mr. Speaker, the worry that people have, the elder advocates, is that they've seen this come to the front and get some publicity. They think things are going to happen, and the problems are going to be solved. Then we're back in the same position again.

But, Mr. Speaker, the minister said, I believe, that it's not a crisis. Now, maybe the Auditor General didn't say the word "crisis." The minister said that he didn't read it, and I believe that to be the case because if you look on pages 70 to 72, there are 10 highlights of the findings. If those don't constitute what I would consider a crisis, I don't know what would.

I won't read them all but just a couple of quotes. Number 1, they saw "instances where the number of RNs employed or present at a facility failed to meet the . . . Basic Standard."

Number 2, "approximately half of the facilities we visited did not ensure that residents received complete annual medical assessments from physicians." These are people whose average age is 85. That seems to me to be a bit of a crisis, Mr. Speaker.

Then number 3 – it's already been alluded to – is about the chemical and physical restraints. That seems to me to be a crisis if that's going on with people at the tail end of their lives, Mr. Speaker.

Then number 6, just to highlight, is the one where "staff were instructed by facility management to wash and dress residents who were awake as early as 3:00 AM even though breakfast was not served till 8:00 AM," and "75% of the residents were in bed by 7:00 PM." That seems to be pretty urgent for these people. As I say, it goes right to number 10. That seems to me to be urgent.

What will happen here is that the government says – and they've known about this for months because they've replied to it – yes, we're looking into it at some point six months down the way. For many of these people that are an average age of 85, six months is a lifetime, Mr. Speaker. Surely in the last part of one's life one should at least have the right to live in basic dignity, and the Auditor General's report says that that's not going on in a significant number

of our facilities. That to me is pretty urgent and pretty serious.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Prins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to also make a few comments about the Standing Order 30 motion. It says in the motion that they want to talk about "a matter of urgent public importance; namely, the ongoing suffering of residents in long-term care facilities." Now, I'm not going to deny that there could be some suffering happening there, but I don't think it's a huge, huge problem. Although, if even one person suffers, that is a problem. We want to deal with it. I don't think it's a serious enough issue at this point in time to hold up the normal activities of the House.

I want to speak to this because I've been part of the process. I'm the chairman of the Seniors Advisory Council for Alberta, and I've been travelling around the province looking at different care facilities. I think I have somewhat of an idea of what's going on in some of these facilities. Many of them are not new. Many of them are some years old. But it's not about the paint on the walls or how fancy the carpet is; it's about the care that the seniors are getting in these places.

The care that the seniors are getting is very good. I would say that in 100 per cent of the homes that I have visited, the people are being well looked after. I would say that not in all cases is there adequate staff because adequate staffing is always a problem. It is a problem in hospitals, it's a problem in seniors' facilities, and it's a problem in long-term care facilities. So this is something that we want to look at.

As the Seniors Advisory Council we travel around the province to listen and work with Albertans to improve the quality of life of seniors in our communities. We take this very seriously. The council highlights issues that are important to seniors in our communities and brings them forward to the government. So we're working along with the ministries of both health and seniors. I would say that ensuring our seniors receive high quality care and accommodations in our long-term care facilities is a concern to both seniors and their families.

I know about this from a very personal point of view too, Mr. Speaker. My own mother lives in a Red Deer nursing home. She's been there now for some seven months since she broke her hip, and she's not able to walk and to be at home with my father. So I go there quite often. Probably every time I get home for a weekend, I go down and see her, and she's very happy in this place. This place is about 40 years old. It's the oldest nursing home in Red Deer that's still operational. It's crowded. She's in a room with three other people, but basically she's very happy. She has good care. When she goes home to her actual home with my father for a day and visits, she's always looking forward to going back to the nursing home because she knows that she's going to be well looked after. The nurses are there to help her with all her physical tasks, and she's happy to go back and live in that facility.

I'm pleased that the minister of seniors has taken immediate action. That's why I'm thinking we don't have to have this discussion today because the ministers of both health and seniors have taken immediate action in appointing a continuing care review committee. The Member for Calgary-Foothills and myself will be co-chairing or leading this committee. We'll be travelling around and having these discussions with various groups. These groups will be the public, facility operators, seniors organizations, staff in these facilities, families and the operators of these care facilities. So we will be having these discussions, travelling around the province hearing what the issues are, and we will be making some kind of a recommendation as soon as possible.

If there are things that we find that need immediate attention, of course we will report that to the minister as soon as we find out, and the ministers can take action if they see fit. This will build upon the recommendations outlined in the Auditor General's report. We have been aware for some time that this report was coming. We've been gearing up our operations. We've put together an operational plan already for the Seniors Advisory Council. It's in a draft stage now, but we have taken immediate steps to respond to some of these issues.

We feel that the continuum of care that we provide in these homes throughout the province is very important. It's not only our duty but our mandate and what we want to do because we love these people, to ensure that the standards are monitored and enforced and that they get the absolute very best care that they can get in our province. Our seniors have contributed so much to our province over the years, and they are still a vital part of our population, and we want to look after them.

So, Mr. Speaker, I would speak against this motion under Standing Order 30 and would ask my colleagues to support me in that.

3:20

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. I want to make it very clear that this is about more than who wins or loses a Standing Order 30; it's about the quality of life of seniors. If I can use the imagery of a scale of justice and you imagine the balance, on one side of the balance you've got the Solicitor General's budget; on the other side of the balance you have the lives, the well-being, the dignity of seniors. We know the outcome of the Solicitor General's budget. This is a majority government, and the Solicitor General's budget will go through. It's a foregone conclusion. Nothing we could do, no matter how much we had concerns about budget items and so on, would prevent that budget from being passed. It's going to happen. When you contrast that with the well-being of seniors, I would suggest that there is an urgency.

Had the election not been called in the fall, it was my understanding that the Auditor General's report was going to be released at that time. What has happened now is that we've had another five, six months go by, and we've now recognized that, yes, there is a problem. Keep in mind that that recognition was just in a very small sample. One-third of the small sample indicated a number of problems. One of the problems that hasn't been previously brought up and to me is extremely scary is the open medication trays, where any senior suffering from dementia could walk by the trays, scoop it up, put in a handful, and then we've got the ambulance pulling up to the door of the seniors' residence to deal with an emergency situation.

Two weeks ago on Friday I hadn't been in a seniors' residence or long-term care residence for a number of years, since my grandmother died. When I went in there, while I was visiting a gentleman who was on a feeding tube lying in bed, he had previously been medicated because when he was able to be mobile, it appeared that there was the possibility of a threat. In this particular facility he had been egged on by nursing attendants, witnessed by the fellow's wife and other staff, to the point where he would get upset, and he would want to lash out because of the provocation that he was experiencing. So he was given the pills and basically put into bed.

We celebrated VE victories last week. Now a number of these wonderful seniors who gave their all for us to have the quality of life that we're currently experiencing are lying in beds, and there aren't sufficient staff to take them and put them on the toilet. As a result,

they have to wear Depends or diapers whether or not their systems are functional. It's a matter of basically managing the situation rather than dealing with their quality of life.

The long-term care rent went up by 50 per cent, but there were no accompanying benefits to seniors.

I would suggest that the faster we can start moving on correcting a problem that has been identified by the Auditor General – and basically I would suggest that in that short sample that he did, he has, as far as I'm concerned, just begun to scratch the surface of greater underlying difficulties.

Again, I'll conclude by saying: Solicitor General's budget, automatic rubber-stamp pass; quality of seniors' life, let's get started right now and address their issues, please. Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, under Standing Order 30 the chair can provide as many as he deems appropriate to participate, and we've had six participants with respect to this matter.

I would like to make a comment with respect to the participation of the last three speakers. The subject matter is urgency. There was absolutely nothing in there that convinced the chair to do with urgency in the last three speakers. There was a good overview of certain issues in the province of Alberta, but it did not contribute to the decision that the Speaker will now have to make with this particular matter.

First of all, proper notice was given yesterday. This Standing Order 30 arrived in my office at 3:55 p.m. yesterday, so it afforded ample opportunity for the chair to review the report itself. All members should know that the chair has read the report two times word by word, underlining, so there was very attentive attention given to the Auditor General's report. Should there be a test as to what was said on page 52 or 54, perhaps we'd give the right answer.

Secondly, before the question as to whether this motion should proceed to be put to the Assembly, the chair must rule whether the motion meets the requirements of Standing Order 30(7), which requires that the matter proposed for discussion relate to a "genuine emergency, calling for immediate and urgent consideration."

As the chair had indicated last week in relation to another Standing Order 30 request, at page 1318 of *Alberta Hansard* from May 5, 2005, the relevant parliamentary authorities on this topic are "*Beauchesne's* paragraphs 387 and 390 and the *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, pages 587 to 589." The chair has reviewed these references closely in considering this request for leave, and there are two key points that the chair would like to emphasize to all members.

First, to meet the requirements of urgency, there must not be another opportunity for the members of this Assembly to discuss the matter. One could look at *Beauchesne's* paragraph 390 and the *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* at page 589. There must not be another opportunity for members of this Assembly to discuss this matter. When the chair reviews the Order Paper and looks at the motions on the Order Paper and the bills on the Order Paper, clearly there is not another opportunity afforded to the members.

Secondly, the matter must relate to a genuine emergency. What we have before us is the wording of a member's proposed motion, and it's as follows:

Be it resolved that this Assembly adjourn the ordinary business of the Assembly to discuss a matter of urgent public importance; namely, the ongoing suffering of residents in long-term care facilities in Alberta as identified by the May 2005 report of the Auditor General.

I did listen attentively to all six participants and the arguments from all sides of the House. I repeat again that I've closely reviewed

today's Order Paper to determine whether or not there's another opportunity afforded to members to discuss this very serious matter. It is a fact – it is a fact – that the estimates for the Department of Health and Wellness are scheduled for consideration tomorrow afternoon. The chair is cognizant of the fact that the Committee of Supply process may be somewhat limiting in terms of the number of members that may be entitled to speak. Additionally, I repeat that when looking at the bills or motions on the Order Paper, such are silent on anything dealing with this question.

I would like to point out, however, that I have very serious concerns with respect to the wording of the hon. member's motion; in fact, quite uncomfortable by the actual wording of the request. Instead of a straightforward request to adjourn the business of the Assembly to discuss the Auditor General's report on the conditions in long-term care facilities, the request refers to the "ongoing suffering of residents." I repeat: I have read this report twice word for word in search of such a phrase. It is not to be found anywhere in the report.

3:30

I am also concerned that by putting the question "Shall the debate on the urgent matter proceed?" the chair could be viewed as agreeing with the provocative wording of the hon. member's request. Under Standing Order 30 there is no opportunity to amend the request as an emergency debate does not entail a decision of the House. Furthermore, the chair does not want to set a precedent whereby politically motivated sentiments or rhetorical flourishes are viewed as legitimate ways of wording requests under Standing Order 30. In short, the wording of the request itself cannot be overshadowed by and overshadow the actual issue, which is so serious for so many Albertans.

Although the chair has concerns with the wording of the hon. member's motion, the chair is hard-pressed to find that this matter is not a genuine emergency. The very fact that almost one-third of the long-term care facilities under review did not meet basic standards of those Albertans who have undoubtedly played an important role in the first century of this province is of a very grave nature. I particularly draw all hon. members' attention to those items that are highlighted on pages 70, 71, and 72, and I just quote several.

Although we saw ample evidence of frequent and regular physician contact with residents, approximately half of the facilities we visited did not ensure that residents received complete annual medical assessments from physicians.

The next item:

In over half of the facilities, we saw inconsistencies in decision making, evaluation of outcomes, policy, procedure, practice and charting methodology in the use of chemical and physical restraints. Some facilities use a "no restraint" policy, while others use chemical or physical restraints, often without adequate documentation, and in a few isolated cases, without apparent medical authorization required by the Basic Standards.

Accordingly, the chair finds that the request for leave is in order, and now puts the following question. Shall the debate on the urgent matter proceed? Those in favour, say yes.

Some Hon. Members: Yes.

The Speaker: Those opposed, say no.

Some Hon. Members: No.

[Several members rose]

The Speaker: Under our Standing Orders, hon. members, if 15 or more members do advise the Speaker of their intent to support it – and I do count 15; that's the number – the debate shall now proceed. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the ruling, and I also appreciate the admonition about the wording of the motion. I think it probably a better phrase would have been: to debate the Auditor General's report. In fact, however, I do sincerely believe that there is ongoing suffering which is currently taking place in long-term care facilities in Alberta.

I think that the strong feeling which I have, which has grown as I've dealt increasingly with people who are advocates for people in long-term care, either people who had members of their family in a nursing home, for example, and they passed away or who are currently trying to provide supplementary care for members of the family – I just have a tremendous sense, from talking to the people, of their frustration and their anguish, in fact, for the conditions that they find the members of their family in.

Now, other members opposite have talked about, you know, the fine care that people receive, and I have no doubt that there are many facilities in our province that do provide a good standard of care. I also believe that the vast majority of people who work in these facilities are doing their very best, and I don't cast any aspersions on the work of people who provide this care. Very often they are extremely short-staffed and unable to do the work.

So, for example, we could talk about one of the issues, Mr. Speaker, on the same pages that you referenced, where residents are awakened and got out of bed at 3 in the morning when they don't get their breakfast until 8 o'clock. Why does that actually happen? It says, for example:

Staff were instructed by facility management to wash and dress residents who were awake as early as 3:00 AM even though breakfast was not served until 8:00 AM. In another facility, 75% of the residents were in bed by 7:00 PM.

Now, why do the staff do that? Is it because they don't get it or they're being mean? Of course not, but in order to get every resident up and dressed in time for breakfast with the short staff that they have, they have to start at 3 a.m., and in order to get everybody to bed by a reasonable time with the short staff, they have to start at 7 o'clock at night. That is what is producing the difficulty.

Now, this issue has come up before on the Members' Services Committee, and I and other members of that committee from the opposition have raised this matter in the past with the Auditor General. In fact, the Auditor General prior to his news conference yesterday did indicate that it was the work of people on the committee and the advocates for seniors and the opposition that had brought this issue forward and had led to his investigation. I congratulated the Auditor General on an outstanding report because this report, I believe, is actually going to make a difference.

The problem, Mr. Speaker, quite frankly, is that we're continuing to get mixed messages from the government. On the one hand, the ministers say: we've been working on this for a long time; we take it seriously; we are going to work very hard to try and correct it. Then we have the Premier, who's still in the old message box, who's saying: if there's a problem, bring it forward, and we'll look into it. Well, the Auditor General has looked into it and has delivered what I consider to be a devastating report, and it's a devastating condemnation of government inaction and neglect over many years. How could it have gotten this bad in the richest province of this entire Confederation?

I want to bring up, as well, the question of the funding levels. The Auditor General does address this in his report. It was about two or

two and a half years ago that the government allowed private facility operators to raise the rates in long-term care facilities by 50 per cent, and the government at the time said that this was to enable these facilities to provide better quality of care. Well, Mr. Speaker, it was not six months later, then, that the NDP opposition research went through the Extencicare annual report, which talked about increases in the profitability of that corporation due to the government's decision to increase long-term care rates.

So the money, of course, Mr. Speaker, didn't necessarily find its way into better patient care or higher standards. It, in fact, found its way into the bottom line of the investors of these private health care companies, and that in itself is a good, strong argument against increasing private participation in our health care system generally. It's an example of what's wrong with that approach.

I want to deal a little bit with the committee that's been set up that does the inspections. Of course, we know that these facilities are not inspected by this committee except every two to three years; in some cases, three years between inspections. We know that last year the committee only did two inspections. The Auditor General deals with this in his report. He talks about people not being properly trained to do the work, not checking on all the standards. Basically, he's saying that, at risk of putting words into the Auditor General's mouth – well, I won't do that, Mr. Speaker. What I'll say on my own is that the conclusion I reached upon reading that section is that this is a committee of well-meaning amateurs who don't really have the qualifications to do the job.

3:40

The government has failed to ensure that these facilities are properly inspected. The result is that basic standards are not enforced. The basic standards have not been updated since 1995. Basic standards are "out of date or unclear." The basic standard for nursing hours is "out of date." There are "no Basic Standards" for personal care attendants. Care "may differ among the regions." There is "no process to review the Basic Standards." The basic standards are "not readily available to the public," and residents "may not receive appropriate care." There are "no adequate systems in place to monitor compliance with Basic Standards." Thirty-one per cent of basic standards relating to care "were not met by facilities" visited by the Auditor General. "Most Authorities do not inspect facilities for compliance with all the Basic Standards." The accreditation is "not sufficient."

The Health Facilities Review Committee, which I've already mentioned, doesn't have medical training. It has no authority to enforce compliance.

- The provisions of the . . . Act specifically prohibit the review by committee members of medical records without the resident's consent, and financial records. Their reviews are primarily qualitative based assessments concerned with the dignity and satisfaction of residents and families.
- The Committee does not check for compliance with all Basic Standards. Its processes do not contemplate areas covered by Basic Standards, such as provision of minimum care hours, frequency of physician assessments, therapeutic diets, maintenance of health records and care plans, user fees and trust accounts.

So, Mr. Speaker, the wonderful assurances we've received from the Premier and others about the great work this committee is doing are contradicted by the Auditor General's report.

Now, some of the findings that the Auditor General made are that most facilities do maintain staff levels in accordance with basic standards, but the Auditor General found "instances where the number of RNs employed or present at a facility failed to meet the required Basic Standards, or where LPNs were inappropriately

substituted for RNs." They found cases where housekeeping and payroll duties were reported as nursing hours.

In the end, Mr. Speaker, the government owes the people of this province . . .

The Speaker: I think that's where we conclude, hon. member. The chair is prepared to recognize an additional member. The hon. Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I hesitate to get involved in this debate, but I believe it's a very important debate, and I believe there are some very important issues that need to be brought up. The first issue that I will bring up is the whole idea of an accountant going out and auditing a nursing home, a long-term care facility and making comments about what medically is being done. I do have some significant issues with that. I do have significant issues when comments are made after this.

I'll attempt to go through the 23 recommendations. Mr. Speaker, first of all, in the provision of nursing and personal services in essence what the comments are saying is not that there were problems with the patients; it is saying that the standards were not met. It is not saying that there were problems with the patients. It also says that in some localities and on some occasions they had difficulty getting RNs and attempted to fill these positions with LPNs. It does not say if this was a permanent practice or if this was a temporary situation. Unfortunately, by the reading – again, purely reading what is in this document – it states that they could not do it all the time. Certainly, I think that's a standard that does have to be met. I think that the standards do have to be updated. But, Mr. Speaker, as a case for being a critical emergency, I do not believe so.

Provision of physician services. I think that this is one that has been identified by several people in this Assembly. As a physician, Mr. Speaker, I implore to say that a person does not have to have a physical exam if they are being seen once a week or once every two weeks by a physician. I think that's a gross issue that is out there. It does not have to be, and to say that because there has not been a physical exam structured and put in by the particular facility when indeed the rest of the evidence is not there, when indeed it may be that this particular patient is being seen by the physician every week, every month, every three months, I think does a great disservice to the whole facility questions.

The maintenance of health records. Certainly, Mr. Speaker, I will be the first one to admit that as a physician I was not the best person when it came to health records, but health records do not patient care make. I think that there's a significant issue that if we're talking about patient care, which is what this motion defines and it's what this motion is concerned about, is it concerned because there are not records written down on a piece of paper? I don't believe so.

Therapeutic and special diets. Again I will quote from the Auditor General's report. "Most facilities met this Basic Standard. Some facilities had problems meeting the required consistency of some diets, and physician orders for special diets were not sufficiently documented in a small number of cases." So some facilities had problems. They recognized it when it came to consistency, and I would hope that they are doing something about it. "Physician orders for special diets were not sufficiently documented." Again, Mr. Speaker, I have a problem when we talk about patient care and, instead, we're actually talking about documentation. This is about the patient, not documentation.

The next one is medications to residents. Again, I'll go through exactly what the Auditor General has stated: "inconsistent documentation of the effectiveness and adverse effects of medication therapies, particularly relative to pain control and chemical restraint." Absolutely these things have to be documented, Mr.

Speaker, but because it is not written down, does that guarantee that the patient is getting poor care? I don't think so.

"Inadequate security and storage." These are very serious questions. I think the anecdote about a patient going in and grabbing handfuls of drugs is extremely, extremely insulting to those people who work in these facilities, Mr. Speaker. Could they be better? Absolutely they could be better. Absolutely they can do things. It's human nature to get complacent and not do entirely everything all of the time.

"Inconsistent control over phone orders signed off by physicians." Think about that, Mr. Speaker. The Auditor General put that in the report because a phone order was on the document and the physician did not sign it. Is that a reason why there's poor patient care? I find this quite insulting.

The admission processes: again, documentation.

Developing, implementing, and monitoring resident care plans: again, just because there are not necessarily time frames or outcomes or goals does not mean that they are not getting care.

I will reiterate something that has been brought up and has been kind of a focal point in this discussion, which is about waking. I believe the direct quote was: waking up patients at 3 a.m. for breakfast at 8 a.m. That's not what it says.

An Hon. Member: Yes, it is.

Dr. Oberg: That's not what it says.

I will read what it says. "One facility with a policy to dress awake residents starting at 3:00 AM for 8:00 AM breakfast." Mr. Speaker, if the patient is awake, what do they want them to do? Do they want them to stay in bed in their pajamas for five hours when they're awake? Is that what they're talking about here? The point that I'm making on this is that there are a lot of questionable calls in this particular document. As someone who has worked in a nursing home, in a long-term care facility, and as someone who respects those people who work there, I think there are significant issues here.

I think that, obviously, we have to look very, very seriously at the care that is given to our seniors at any particular time. I think care given to our seniors is incredibly important, but for an accountant to go and adequately look at that care and then have an emergency debate in the Legislature, I think it's very, very difficult.

Mr. Speaker, when it comes to meals, co-ordination of temporary residences, handling of resident deaths, the handling of resident deaths is an interesting one. This is an emergency because one of the facilities, instead of getting a death certificate within 24 hours, gets it within 48 hours. This is, therefore, an emergency.

3:50

Mr. Speaker, I've got a huge amount of problems with this. There are a lot of people in this industry that do a wonderful, wonderful job. Does that mean that our standard should not be updated? No, it doesn't. But it does mean that the minister is updating them and is setting a very good tone as the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports.

Mr. Speaker, this is the danger. A report like this is the danger. When people go in, take a snapshot of what is occurring, take a look at the regulations and the documentation, and assume that patient care isn't there, that's the problem. That's why I have a huge problem with this report.

The Speaker: Okay. I've got some interest shown here, so I will deal with the hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace as he has not participated yet.

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Auditor General initiated a value-for-money audit of programs for seniors delivered by Alberta Health and Wellness and Alberta Seniors and Community Supports. In conducting this audit, the Auditor General's office met with different branches of Alberta Health and Wellness, all regional health authorities, and 25 long-term care facilities. Multidisciplinary teams including health professionals conducted facility audits. The Auditor General did not indicate how these facilities were selected, and I'm just left to wonder if he was not directed to certain facilities over others.

It is important to note that the Auditor General's report is not about care but about the systems that are in place. The government has already taken steps to improve those systems. Currently there are 14,300 long-term care beds in the province. Employees include 3,500 nurses and 10,000 health care aides. It is worth noting that every day in this province these hard-working health care providers deliver quality care to residents of long-term care. It's also worth noting that the Auditor General himself said that he would feel very comfortable placing a member of his family in any of the facilities he reviewed.

The Auditor General's review shows that standards for the provision of health care services and continuing care need to be updated. He found that long-term care facilities met 69 per cent of care standards, partially met another 27 per cent, and did not meet 4 per cent. Mr. Speaker, I also get calls from my constituents expressing some concerns in certain long-term care facilities, and often those calls are responded to very adequately. It is clear from the results that systems to monitor compliance with standards need to be improved. Both Alberta Health and Wellness and Alberta Seniors and Community Supports require further information to assess the effectiveness of services and programs.

The Auditor General's report makes seven key recommendations to improve services in long-term care facilities. A key recommendation is to upgrade Alberta's long-term care standards. Alberta Health and Wellness recognized some time ago the growing pressure on long-term care from an aging population and had already been developing these new standards. These upgraded standards for publicly funded long-term care health services have been drafted and will be the subject of public consultations during this particular summer. The new standards require the development of a care plan for each client and focusing, measuring, and reporting on the effectiveness of care provided to each individual. These new standards clearly spell out the responsibilities of clients and their families, health care providers, operators, regional health authorities, and the department, and they also provide for regular reviews and upgrading of standards to meet professional best practices.

New tools are being implemented to better assess the needs of long-term care residents. These new tools will also measure the effectiveness of care provided, and we expect the implementation of these new tools to be completed shortly. Alberta Health and Wellness is also working with regional health authorities on better measures of cost effectiveness. Health authorities have been asked to include longer term planning for continuing care services in their three-year business plan.

A measure of the quality of care delivered in Alberta's long-term care system is the number of complaints received each year. On that point it is worth noting that the long-term care system provides over 5 million long-term care service days per year, and only around 400 complaints are received each year. The Member for Calgary-Foothills, the chair of the Healthy Aging and Continuing Care in Alberta Implementation Advisory Committee, and the Member for Lacombe-Ponoka as chair of the Seniors Advisory Council will conduct a stakeholder review of the care and accommodation service standards, which will be completed by the end of August.

In closing, let me say again that the government of Alberta expects long-term care to be safe, high quality, and respectful of the needs and dignity of residents, their families, and staff. Most residents of long-term care facilities receive excellent health care thanks to the hard work and compassion of staff.

The Auditor General's report showed that 90 per cent of the basic care standards were fully or partially met. He did identify areas where we need to improve, and we will take his recommendations very seriously. As a government we are committed to acting on the Auditor General's report. It highlights the importance of providing quality care to Albertans.

We are already working with regional health authorities to focus our publicly funded continuing care system on quality of care and quality of life for each person. We are updating health service and accommodation standards and are working with regional health authorities to improve staff training, increase nursing care hours, and measure and monitor the effectiveness of care. Ultimately, we want to ensure that long-term care residents have choice and are treated with dignity and respect. Our goal remains the same: to work with residents and their families to ensure that Alberta's long-term care services put their needs first.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I know that I didn't call Orders of the Day today, which precluded anybody from having coffee, but we will waive that so that you may participate with that.

Then just to make sure that there's some orderliness with respect to the debate this afternoon, as there are 83 members in the House, 82 without myself, there will be three government participants for each one of the opposition participants.

We'll now call on the hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There are a couple of contextual statements I'd like to make at the beginning of my remarks on this special debate under Standing Order 30, proposed by the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

One, I want to make it clear that I do not believe and I think that most members of the Assembly do not believe that fault lies with the staff of long-term care centres. I have to say that from what I have seen with my own eyes and in most cases heard from people that contacted me on issues for long-term care, what they're saying overwhelmingly is that (a) there are not enough staff to do the work that has to be done; (b) the staff that are there are sometimes pulled in so many directions that they can't even get done everything that's on their shift.

In the past in the House I've raised questions talking about LPNs being given the duty of distributing medication, which was not on their list of duties to be completed before the end of their shift, and then taking over the medication duties. That then meant that they weren't able to fulfill the rest of the duties that were prescribed for them. Certainly, it's been my experience that staff want to do a good job. They're trying to do a good job, but there aren't enough of them, and they simply don't have enough time to get done everything that needs to be done. I think that concept is reflected in many of the areas that the Auditor General has identified as risks.

Mr. Speaker, I know that many businesspeople would tell you that a risk is an opportunity, so we do have an opportunity here to make things better. I would argue that the reason for the debate this afternoon is to make them better in a hurry.

I'll just give you one brief description of some of the things that I've experienced in long-term care centres that bring urgency to the debate for me. I've spoken to seniors who end up in long-term care who say: "Laurie, I don't want to be wearing a diaper; I'm not

incontinent. I can do this. I just need some help." And there are reasons for that: they've had a stroke; they're paralyzed; they may not be completely functioning with their arms and legs. For whatever reason they can't take themselves to the bathroom, and they need assistance with it.

4:00

Then I see them a couple of months later, and they're going: "Well, yeah, I've had some accidents. I rang and rang and rang the bell." I've even been there, Mr. Speaker, when the person said to me: "I really need to go to the bathroom, and I've been ringing the bell, and nobody's coming. Can you go down to the nursing station and let them know?" I went down and said: "This person needs assistance, and they've requested it, and the bell has been ringing for, whatever, 20 minutes now." I go back. I talk to them for another 20 minutes. This is 40 minutes now. Finally, I leave, and still no one has had the time to be able to assist this person to toilet themselves. Then we end up with what are euphemistically called "accidents."

The next time I see them three months further down the road, guess what, Mr. Speaker? They're wearing a diaper. Why? Well, there have been too many accidents. Now, to a large extent that was self-fulfilling, wasn't it? If there isn't enough staff and they don't have enough time in their shifts to be able to help people toilet, there are going to be a lot of accidents, and then we end up with people essentially warehoused in diapers. This is not dignified. I don't care how you cut it; that is not dignified. When someone is functionally able to go to the toilet and all they need is physical assistance to get themselves on it, they should be able to have that little vestige of dignity accorded to them.

That is what I see happening in our long-term care centres. It's not that staff don't want to help people to do this. They do want to help them to do it. They don't have enough staff to get there. I have yet to be in a long-term care facilities – and this is no word of a lie, Mr. Speaker – where the bells have not been going off with somebody asking for assistance, and they go off the entire time I'm in that facility. That's what's wrong here.

If we're going to seriously consider risk, which I think we should be considering, I would argue that we also seriously consider dignity. We said that we were going to offer a dignified end-of-life care for people, and they are not receiving that at this point in time. We are the people that are able to make that right for them, through our guidance and our decision-making and our funding. So this is a very timely debate, Mr. Speaker. Tomorrow is the budget debate for Health and Wellness, and I will be very interested to see whether there are strong arguments for adequate funding for the medical portion of long-term care in tomorrow's Health and Wellness budget debate.

What I've seen, Mr. Speaker, is that the Auditor General's report was a validation for all of those people that have worked on it. For the Official Opposition, the third party opposition, the advocacy groups, like FAIRE and Elder Advocates and the Alberta Council on Aging and Retired and Semi-Retired and SALT and all those groups that have spoken to me over the years, it's a validation of their experiences and, particularly, the experiences of the family members and the residents themselves that have contacted me and, I'm sure, many others in this Assembly because they found a real schism, a real gap in logic between what they were experiencing and what the government was saying.

We've got all kinds of quotes from *Hansard* in response to previous questions asked by the opposition where the government said: There's no problem, and we're caring for people very well. Well, that wasn't what was happening in people's lives, and this report is a validation of that.

My question, Mr. Speaker, is: why did it take so long to get to this point? If we hadn't had that Auditor General's report released yesterday, we would have had the same response from the government members today that everything was fine. That's what's truly troubling to me. The system that is in place to actually monitor what's going on, the government-supported system, the Health Facilities Review Committee and the Tory backbenchers that are appointed to this committee – what happened? They are paid to go out and look at these facilities and report back and make recommendations on what's supposed to happen.

Why did they not catch any of this? Why? They were doing it. They've been doing it for years. I mean, prior to whomever is appointed on that committee now, last time it was the Member for Calgary-Shaw. Or she was social facilities. There are two committees that are out there looking at these facilities. Why aren't they catching this stuff? Why did it take that kind of work from the Auditor General for it to come out? If it hadn't been released yesterday, we'd be getting the same responses today, Mr. Speaker, and that's a problem. That needs to be addressed, and I hope I can hear from government that it's addressed today.

I think there's a huge problem with accountability. I've already mentioned the lack of accountability and, in fact, what appears to be a lack of work from the Health Facilities Review Committee. Also, Mr. Speaker, where is the accountability on the increases that were approved by the government, an increase in fees on the accommodation and meal side to residents of long-term care facilities? Where's the accountability on that increase? We have not been able to find where service, where hours of care, where quality of food improved after those rates were increased.

They were – I'll remind you – an increase of 42 to 48 per cent for people in long-term care facilities. So they paid almost 50 per cent more, and what did they get? No discernable difference in their care. The minister of health at that time promised fresh fruit and vegetables and whatever for everybody, but when we went back and looked and said, "Did we actually get this outcome?" it was not there, and the minister had to agree that it wasn't there. So we made those individuals and their families pay that additional money for no discernable change in outcome. That's an accountability problem, Mr. Speaker.

We've had little accountability from changes monitored by health authorities around the patient care as well.

Now, another issue that's come up repeatedly: the Liberals had advocated a year ago, actually – I asked a question of the then minister of health why they weren't considering unannounced spot checks with a professional team, who could understand what they were seeing, to go in and spend as much time as they needed to, and if there was noncompliance, the licence would be suspended. What I got was a smart remark back from the minister. He didn't take the question seriously, and he did not respond to it. I welcome anyone to look that up in *Hansard*. It happened in early April of 2004. But no actual response to my question of considering this reasonable proposal.

Well, I guess they finally heard it because now that's exactly what the minister is proposing: unannounced spot checks by a team of professionals. So I guess I should be happy that I was finally listened to, but, Mr. Speaker, that was a year. That was a year that it took.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Is there another government member who would like to participate as well? I indicated the rotation a few minutes ago.

Some Hon. Members: The minister.

The Speaker: There's more than just the minister.

We'll go with the hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat, then the hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills and then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore and then the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview and then the hon. minister.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the present chair of the Health Facilities Review Committee, I'd like to say a few words about the committee and its work. The makeup of the committee is myself as chair and 10 other individuals, who include retired nurses, retired accountants, and retired people with medical backgrounds.

The mission of the Health Facilities Review Committee is to ensure that quality of care, treatment, and standards of accommodation are maintained in health facilities throughout Alberta. The committee is responsible for conducting regular unannounced routine visits at hospitals and nursing homes for the purpose of reviewing and inspecting them and for investigating complaints about care, treatment, and standards of accommodation made by or on behalf of individual patients and residents in these facilities.

The committee is currently responsible for approximately 216 facilities in this province. The committee conducts its routine reviews approximately every 18 months to three years given current financial committee and staffing resources. The reviews are always conducted unannounced. A specific time frame is not announced to enable the committee to vary its visiting schedule, so members are not expected when they visit. The number of reviews per year can vary depending on the number and complexity of complaint investigations being carried out in any fiscal year. For instance, from the stats I have from 1999 to 2005, anywhere from 83 to 107 routine reviews are handled per year.

Significant efforts have been made in the last four years to improve the quality of the committee's routine review and complaint investigation process and to improve the content and quality of the committee's reports. Readers of the committee's reports can now get a better overall picture of the facility than what was available in the past. Facility owners, administrators, and regional health authorities have noted an improvement and have expressed a satisfaction to the committee, particularly in the last two years.

4:10

With regard to complaint investigations the Health Facilities Review Committee receives complaints in a variety of ways: through telephone calls to the office, through letters to the office and e-mail, or by referral by other agencies such as the protection for persons in care or the minister's office.

When a caller phones or a written complaint is received by the Health Facilities Review Committee, the concerns are reviewed to determine whether they fall within the committee's legislated mandate. If they do, a complaint investigation is initiated once the proper authorization forms have been completed and signed by the patient or residence or their legal representative so that the committee may have access to the patient or resident's health information records. If the complainant's concerns relate to abuse, they are immediately referred to the protection for persons in care office. Sometimes the concerns relate to both abuse in care and treatment issues. Therefore, both organizations may conduct their own investigations to address both sides of the issues involved.

When complainants complete the Health Facilities Review Committee complaint forms, they are asked whether they have reported their concerns to another agency. Often the complainants have indicated that they have already communicated with the

protection for persons in care. In those situations the Health Facilities Review Committee does not take any further action to refer the situation to protection for persons in care and will look at the complainant's concerns to determine whether an investigation should be initiated by the Health Facilities Review Committee.

Protection for persons in care and Community Development also receive complaints in the same fashion but mostly through their own reporting line. If the concerns presented to protection for persons in care relate to care, treatment, or standards of accommodation and not to abuse, the complainant is referred to the Health Facilities Review Committee. Both organizations receive the complaints and proceed with their own investigation processes accordingly and independently of each other.

I do have some complaint statistics also. Between the years of 1999 and 2005 on the average between 34 and 37 complaints were received, and that's per year. Of those, between 12 and 24 were not filled out. Of all of those, between one and three per year were withdrawn. Of the 34 to 37, between two and three were not within the committee's mandate.

I think, Mr. Speaker, that in addition, efforts have been made to make better use of technology through the development of our own HFRC database, which will eventually enable the committee and its staff to track trends and recommendations and responses on a facility-by-facility basis as well as on a regional basis.

We all know that improvements can be made, and I would hope that this information is of some assistance to this House. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Foothills, followed by the hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Supports, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Webber: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very humbled to be assigned this important task of leading the government consultation efforts on continuing care health service standards. I'm looking forward to combining my efforts with the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka and to consulting on accommodation standards to create a body of work that will benefit Alberta seniors.

The consultation on the new continuing care standards will involve several stakeholders, including advocacy groups, accredited professional bodies, and industry associations. I'll be dedicating my summer to seeking opportunities to speak with long-term care residents, their families, and home-care clients to hear the perspective of the people who matter most in our discussions, the Albertans who receive care. I will be embarking on meaningful consultations with stakeholders that have expert, first-hand knowledge of continuing care to help ensure that these standards meet the needs of Albertans receiving continuing care.

Mr. Speaker, in my past life I've spent many hours, many days, many months working in health care facilities as both a consultant and a volunteer. I've seen first-hand quality care in these homes in the Calgary area. The people who work in these facilities are absolutely dedicated to what they do. The Auditor's report was a bit of a surprise to me, and I am committed this summer to going out and seeking these areas, these places, these facilities where the Auditor General notes these problems. I will hopefully be able to recommend necessary changes to these facilities.

Mr. Speaker, again short and sweet. I just want you to know that I'm committed to this, and I'm looking forward to a summer of visiting these facilities. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Supports, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore, followed by the hon. Minister of Innovation and Science.

Mrs. Fritz: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I, too, am pleased to speak to this Standing Order 30. I think it's an important motion that was made today, and it gives us an opportunity to address even further the issues in long-term care, especially as it relates to the Auditor General's report. Like you, Mr. Speaker, I've read the report a number of times, and I go through my notes each time and compare them to each recommendation that's made, go through it line by line. It does challenge us in a number of ways.

As was mentioned earlier, it is an opportunity for us to make change, but also, importantly – and that's just what this standing order does – it creates awareness. It lets people know about our long-term care facilities that are in the province, about our seniors' needs in the facilities and how those needs have changed over the years. This is about the long-term needs of seniors, not just the future needs of seniors that are currently in place in facilities.

Many of us here in this Assembly know individuals, families who have had a variety of experiences in the area of being in an institution providing long-term care. You know, Mr. Speaker, we've heard this as well before. Our seniors have changed as far as age in the long-term care facilities, and I'm including lodges as a part of that when I say long-term care. Even 15, 20 years ago the average age of a senior in a lodge was about 65, 68 years old, whereas today we know that in a lodge a senior's average age is about 84. Yet seniors in a lodge facility can be independent. They can require some assistance in care from the community, for example home care. Having said that, we also know, though, that seniors with intermediate needs are now having their needs met in the community through designated assisted living, or assisted living, and what we seem to be terming as supportive living in the community.

The Auditor's report just lightly addresses that issue of supportive living and designated assisted living. I've had a conversation with the Auditor about that, you know, a couple of times over the past few months because I think that this is one of the most important areas. We know that we don't have standards that are currently in place for this new concept of supportive living.

I had an opportunity, as I mentioned before, Mr. Speaker, to go with the Minister of Health and Wellness throughout the province, in the Lethbridge area, Camrose, Wetaskiwin, Calgary, Edmonton, and view a number of facilities. The Member for Wetaskiwin-Camrose is looking at me here. We did have a good day viewing those facilities. We truly know how those facilities are offering great care. This report is about the third that the Auditor looked at where we know there are some genuine issues.

Mr. Speaker, the unbundling of health and wellness and the care provided in long-term care and the accommodations have taken some time. People seem to think that things like this can happen overnight. Well, there are a variety of acts that govern the care. There are a number of regulations, and even with the separation of the two there is some overlap. In developing standards together, we need to also take into consideration this overlap.

4:20

A mention was made earlier about meals. That does fall under the area of Seniors, and in looking at the standards, for example, for meals – this is actually one of the most important activities that people in long-term care can participate in, and that's the sharing of a meal. It's a social gathering. It's a social setting within the care centre. That is under my portfolio and the standards that would be set in that area. I still, though, would need to take into consideration that there are complex health care needs.

That means that somebody could be diabetic and require a special diet, or they could be on renal dialysis and require a therapeutic diet in that way. It also means that some people may require assistance

with feeding from a personal care attendant. It means that we should have dietitians who are responsible for assisting with that meal plan. We should have more than one choice for meals for people. We should have snacks available. We should have meals that are nutritious, that are easily digestible. I guess why I'm telling you about this, Mr. Speaker, is that it's important when we look at the standards that they relate to one another.

We have been working with the regional health authorities, the Alberta Long Term Care Association, the Alberta Senior Citizens Housing Association, and we've been working with them since January to modify and update the existing standards.

For people to believe that there hasn't been any work done in this at all or that we can deal with the whole complexity of this issue within a couple of days is really not the case, Mr. Speaker. This does take time. It does take careful thought, and it is important that we have the inclusion of not just the ministries or government but of people in the community. That's very much about why, too, we have appointed – this is immediate as well – two MLAs. We have the chair of our Seniors Advisory Council, who spoke earlier. As well, we have the chair of the healthy aging and continuing care – I think that's the name of the committee – who just spoke earlier as well. They are going to go out and meet with families, meet with individuals, caregivers, administration, tour facilities. You heard very much earlier what they would be doing and that they will look at what we're anticipating with standards and enforcement of those standards and how that should be done.

I know that the minister of health mentioned yesterday that health is moving forward with personalized assessments. My understanding is that those assessments are to ensure that the needs of individuals are being met, but it's also clear that we've provided in the province through vocational colleges and just through colleges programs for our personal care assistants in order for them to give the care that's needed within a facility. I also understand, too, that they're not mandatory. So the Health and Wellness ministry has developed a training program for the health care aides, and it is being implemented, Mr. Speaker, and these are immediate initiatives.

The average number of care hours was spoken about earlier. The basic standard may call for 1.9 care hours per resident, but that had been increased to 3.1, and my understanding is that there's been funding in the budget to increase those hours to 3.4.

Although these are important changes, Mr. Speaker, and they will have a direct impact on people in facilities, it's still not enough, and we recognize that. This is something that we, with that recognition, knowing that it's not enough, are going to continue to move forward on. We do care about the people that are in the facilities for our elderly.

Already I'm thinking of the Auditor's report in another step, meaning our group homes, our persons with developmental disabilities, looking at monitoring and compliance, looking at accreditation, that we're not just accrediting, in this example, the regional health authority but that we're accrediting the actual facility and that we're reviewing the whole issue of the Alberta seniors benefits program and the fees that we provide for our long-term care centres as well as for our other centres, Mr. Speaker – by that, I mean lodges and self-contained apartments, rent supplements, et cetera – and that we create even in that, as we heard earlier from the Member for Lethbridge-East during question period, standards that really do meet the needs of seniors.

Mr. Speaker, I think it's important, too, that we recognize that we had \$15 million added to the health budget, but to the seniors budget we had \$2 million dollars that were added to put in these important standards.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore, followed by the hon. Minister of Innovation and Science, followed by the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bonko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If I can just go back to a previous conversation that was given by the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation. He cited from the book here. I'll just briefly cite from it as well so I can give some history on this as it relates to my concerns here. When we talk about the basic standards of care, they were talking about 31 per cent that were not met; basic standards of housing, 11 per cent were not met; basic standards of administration, almost 50 per cent of the standards were not met; and the contractual requirements, approximately 28 per cent were not met.

My understanding of the Auditor General is to have an independent, nonpartisan body review specifics with regard to anything that was raised, and I think that the Auditor General has done that. For the minister over there to talk about cherry-picking when he went through the report is quite, in fact, offensive.

I looked on page 76 here, and the fact is documented despite what the minister said. It says: "One facility with a policy to dress awake residents starting at 3:00 AM." That's not a misprint. It says, "3:00 AM for an 8:00 AM breakfast. We confirmed with facility management" that this policy was currently being followed regularly.

Another facility has "the majority of residents in bed by 7:00 PM." Well, I mean, if you're in bed at 7, I'm sure you're going to be up awfully early as well.

One facility also sedated "restless residents between midnight and 2:00 AM" and then placed them in wheelchairs "by the nurses' station until they were asleep." It didn't mention anything about restraining them, but I'm sure that they had to restrain them there as well.

He also mentioned the handling of resident deaths. In this particular case 24 of the outlined recommendations were met. There was only one that wasn't partially met. That doesn't concern me so much.

Another one about the co-ordination of temporary resident absences. It was all met on there.

If I go to page 78, we talk about the collection of user fees. I think that I can speak for my family. I mean, I've had elderly parents in long-term residential care for a long time. I volunteered with them for many, many years. It's no fault of the staff, but any time you go by the nurses' station, you have to find and search for a nurse because they are being run off their feet.

For one facility here it says that the "residents were charged between \$5 and \$10 to deliver physician ordered specimens to the laboratory for testing. In another facility, a resident was [charged] \$200 when he/she requested [a] . . . room change." Again, I find it offensive that these people at this stage of their lives would be nickle-and-dimed. I think they've paid their debt to society, yet we still find ways to take that last bit of dime out of these people.

On page 79 it's recommendation 18, the provision of ambulance and transportation services. Only two cases here that were not met. It said:

Most facilities met the Basic Standard of providing ambulance service and transportation for medically necessary procedures . . . In two facilities, residents paid for all their transportation from the facility, regardless of medical necessity, and in one case [the resident was] charged for staff time to arrange transportation for them.

I would question that. Why are the staff there? If they are there in that particular instance, is it that big a deal to in fact make a phone

call or arrange for transportation for a person to go from one facility to another? I don't think that's outrageous, but to be charged for that staff member's time, again I find that sad.

4:30

Recommendation 21, on page 81, says, "Inventory of resident personal property." This is of particular concern. Seventeen of them were "not met." It says here, "Although all facilities permitted residents to provide and maintain personal furnishings, most facilities did not meet this Basic Standard by not taking or maintaining inventories of resident property." We've heard a number of times, again, that there is high theft. Perhaps the people, as mentioned, that have dementia and go into the wrong room, thinking this article is theirs.

It says: "Most facilities took the view that resident property was not their responsibility. Several facilities advised residents and families to maintain adequate insurance and minimize valuable items on site." Some might say that's being prudent; some might say, in fact, that's being negligent. They're here. They came in with certain things. You've grown up with, say, a wedding ring or a pendant or a brooch, for 40 to 75 years for some of these people. It's hard to give that up. They want that. This is their comfort, and to tell them that they can't have it because "We can't guarantee its safety; it's not my problem; it's not my responsibility" I think is sad. I think it almost should be a basic requirement that when some of these people, in fact, do take up the call to work in the long-term facilities, they would at least come with a bit of compassion and understanding.

I know, in fact, and I've said this before: we all are going to be here one day. If this is the state of care right now, what is it going to be like 20 years from now or even 40 years when I'm going to be there? I shudder to think. In fact, I don't look forward to getting old because of the concerns that are being raised in an ongoing . . . [interjection] Yes, I'm concerned about you, too, there, hon. member. But it still raises a concern.

I'm glad that, in fact, the facilities weren't named. It would have alarmed more people. They're already alarmed. When we have a number of facilities that were visited and they weren't named, that just continues to raise the call of concern for all Albertans because you don't know whether that was the facility down the block from you, if that was the facility that your grandparents or your parents are in.

Again, I think we had this urgency raised, and in fact it is very timely that we do speak about this today. Mr. Speaker, I realize that there are a number of people that do want to speak, but I, in fact, raised some of the concerns with regard to the outlined brief here.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Innovation and Science, followed by the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill.

Mr. Doerksen: Mr. Speaker, this is, in fact, a rare occasion that we have taken this afternoon to suspend the ordinary business of the House. In my time here I don't recall another time, although there may have been one other time when this actually happened. In that regard, I think the discussion we have is a serious debate and one that we should treat so. So I will do that. If we don't in fact use this time to debate what the Auditor General has said, then we are wasting our air time, and that would be a disgrace to the public, that would be a disgrace to those people that we represent.

I don't believe that there's a person in this Assembly that doesn't believe in the importance of providing proper care and attention to our seniors, in particular those in the long-term care facilities or assisted-living facilities or lodges. It's important to all of us, and we need to collectively find an approach or approaches that will in fact help that.

I do want to draw attention to something, actually, Mr. Speaker, that you pointed out in the notice of motion, which I think bears repeating. The motion says, "urgent public importance; namely, the ongoing suffering of residents in long-term care facilities . . . as identified by the May 2005 report of the Auditor General."

In my own quick reading of the report, it does not make that statement. I think that needs to be very clear when we debate this, that that has not been the focus, that is not the attention of the Auditor General's report. That being said, the Auditor General has made a review of nursing homes. He has in fact visited 25 facilities in all regions across the province and come up with a number of inconsistencies in those facilities, and we ought to pay attention to them.

The one difference that I would make is that in financial auditing, the process you normally use is to pick a sample size in order to check the processes of whether a financial transaction was properly recorded and been accounted for. They will never ever do a hundred per cent audit. My observation would be that this is a small sample size, but again because it was carried out in all the regions, I think that it bears attention.

He makes reference to the Health Facilities Review Committee. Again, he does not criticize the Health Facilities Review Committee for the actions that it has undertaken. I would encourage the minister to look at the operations of the Health Facilities Review Committee and see whether we should beef up that particular committee and use it in a more aggressive approach, especially in the short term, to check out the other facilities that were not visited by the Auditor General as a step to start the process.

I apologize if my comments will be somewhat disjointed. I tried to put my notes together in fairly quick order here.

The one thing that we experience as politicians dealing with this is that often our personal experiences come into play. For myself, I have family members who have been resident in facilities, facilities that have not been in this province, as a matter of fact. I have family members who work in these facilities. That's why it is very critical for us to try to not let the anecdotal experiences that we are used to colour the objectivity that we should otherwise have.

Hence, Mr. Speaker, I have tried very carefully to look at the actual recommendations of the Auditor General in terms of what he is saying. I would draw your attention, first of all, to his introduction in the report, whereby he says:

This is a report about how the government can improve its systems to deliver care and programs to Alberta's seniors . . . We also visited a sufficient number of long-term care facilities to assess, against provincial standards, the quality of care and services . . . across the province.

Then, of course, in the report he makes a number of recommendations and highlights a few of the ones that need to be addressed more urgently than other ones.

The response of the two ministers to his report has been that they will certainly take those under consideration and move on them, and I have every confidence in our ministers that they will in fact take these recommendations seriously and begin to implement them.

There are, of course, some recommendations in here that could be problematic for politicians. In recommendation 4 it talks about "accommodation rate and funding decisions." Of course, the experience that we had a couple of years ago when we in fact raised

the accommodation rate to be more reflective of other rates across the country, it created some issues with those residents and with their families, Mr. Speaker. But here's a recommendation, again, to look at that one more time, and in fact we should.

The other thing that I will point out in terms of my reading of the Auditor General and the reason why we should be careful about the report is that this is not a report about public versus nonprofit versus private. There's nothing that I can see in the report that makes any inference one way or another with respect to who operates the facility. So we shouldn't let that get in our way, but we should be careful as we look through all of the facilities.

4:40

Mr. Speaker, I would point out a couple of things that I think are important, at least from my assessment. On page 20 it talks about the waiting lists for long-term care facilities. I'm actually pleased to see that the trend there has been a positive trend, whereby the waiting lists are not as long as they used to be. Clearly, there are still some issues there, but with an aging population we need to look at that to see: are the trends right? Are there places being made available for the people that want them and that desire them? So that's an important issue.

At pages 22 and 23 is the case-mix index, whereby the case-mix index is in fact increasing as residents in the facilities are of higher critical need. Again, Mr. Speaker, that would imply that with the higher case-mix index in a facility the level of care should reflect that particular case-mix index.

The report also talks at length on page 25 about the workforce. Mr. Speaker, as has been noted many times in this Assembly, there are many people who work in these facilities that do their utmost to provide the care. But I think we need to look again at the systems and ask ourselves questions, even questions about contracts. Do contracts prohibit the flow of people to actually work in these facilities? I think, if we're going to do an examination of the system, let's examine everything in the system and find out if, in fact, there are barriers to the workforce. Again, with the aging population it's incumbent upon all of us to look at the issues around health care because that's where the growth is, and for people working in that, we need to find ways to encourage younger people to enter the field and to stay in the field and look at that.

Mr. Speaker, that was a quick synopsis of some of the things that I read through in the Auditor's report. The Auditor is appointed by this Assembly as an independent person and deserves the respect and the consideration of the recommendations that he makes to make sure that we are looking at some of these issues. Again, I am confident that the ministers responsible are going to respond appropriately and that all members of this Assembly will in fact assist them in the work that they need to do to work in this very important area.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmor, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill, and there's a vacancy for government members should one choose to participate.

Mr. Danyluk: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this report. I'd like to make a couple of points in particular. I think what happened is there were a number of members opposite that really made reference to the report as if the sky was falling. I think what is very important to acknowledge is that we are in a situation of always trying to make the lodges, the seniors' housing, a better situation, better for seniors, more accommodating for their needs.

The main issue that I would like to talk about is the management aspect. I have to admit that I'm not as familiar with how the management is run in urban centres or in the larger centres, but I was previously a member of the foundation before becoming elected to this Assembly and have had an extended, I would suggest, duration of time spent on the board. I need to say that in rural Alberta – and I would suggest rural because I would reaffirm that that is what I'm familiar with – we had a foundation, a board that managed all of these different seniors' facilities and met in those facilities once a month. I would like to suggest that we were not alone as far as the management body was concerned. I mean, we had the auxiliary of these health facilities that were involved. We had community members. We had volunteers. There was family. There were the health units. Everybody had the same goal in mind: making the facility not an institution but a home. Everyone had the same goals.

When we talk about the operation of the facility, the operation of the foundation, let me assure you that on our visitations if the food just wasn't right or if things weren't working right, the seniors were very quick to inform us and enlighten us on what direction we should be going.

I want to say that I appreciate the Auditor General's report. I appreciate it from the aspect that I think it is an independent study, and it does look at different facilities. It should make us aware that maybe there are aspects, maybe there are directions that we need to spend more attention on.

We in rural Alberta are faced with some major, major challenges when we talk about seniors' housing and availability. I use the example of the lodge, and I'll use the example in St. Paul. We had a lodge that had 38 units. We had a waiting list of about 20 people, so we modernized the lodge. We added on about 12 units, thinking that this would be a great idea; we'd minimize the list or at least bring the list down. After modernization what ended up taking place is that we added 12 units, and the list went up to 30. So then we again modernized, and we put an addition on of 40 extra units. At that time what happened is that those units were filled up, and the waiting list went up to 70.

When I go to the seniors' housing facilities and the lodges and speak to the seniors, they are very happy with the facilities. This is discussions with the seniors. In fact, the hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake's mother lives in my constituency, and every time I go into the lodge, she tells me and reiterates over and over again how she very much appreciates the service that she's getting.

These are some of the realities of it. I know that there are problems, and I know that there are issues that developed that we need to address. We need to look at the future needs, and when we talk about management – and I know that the report mentions medication. One of the challenges, as I did mention in my motion last night, Motion 508, is that we are in a crunch for receiving any physiotherapy or having any physiotherapists in rural areas. Seniors need some physiotherapists. There is no doubt about that. We cannot get them in our hospitals. We can't get them in our seniors' homes. I don't know what the solution is. We try to boost the emphasis on trying to get more physiotherapists into our regions.

An Hon. Member: It's been cut.

Mr. Danyluk: Physiotherapists have not been cut. Sorry, Mr. Speaker. They have not been cut. What happens is that the physiotherapists aren't there to be cut. They are moving to urban areas, and that is the problem we have in rural Alberta.

4:50

Mr. Speaker, I want to re-emphasize that I think we need to work together as a government, as an opposition, as municipalities, as

communities. We say that the future is in our youth. Well, you know, there is a lot of future in seniors. They have so much to contribute, and they are very much a part of our society. We have worked very closely with them, I know, in my constituency, Mr. Speaker, and we will continue to do so.

Thank you so much.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill. We do have vacancies for government members.

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's also a pleasure for me to rise this afternoon and join this debate under Standing Order 30. I've been an MLA now for just over four years, but prior to that time I spent a lot of time in auxiliary hospitals, seniors' lodges, seniors' apartment complexes, long-term care facilities, and various other housing and supportive areas for seniors. Of course, I'm talking about my pastoral visitation and also the church services that we ran on a regular basis in many of these seniors' care facilities all around the area.

Mr. Speaker, I guess I have to tell you as a pastor that when you go into these facilities, the residents, of course, are very, very happy to see you. The other thing that you find out is that as a pastor the seniors tell you everything. Yes, I mean everything. They do not hold anything back. There are no secrets when you're in there on a pastoral visitation. They will tell you about some of their personal issues. They will tell you about the way they're cared for. They'll tell you about the food. They'll tell you about the staff. They'll tell you literally everything that is on their mind.

Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that for 12 years I visited a number, I would say probably close to 10 different facilities on a regular basis, and very, very seldom did I hear negative complaints, did I hear negative response. Very, very seldom did I hear of any chronic problems, certainly of no abuse or neglect or anything like that. Every now and then, yes, there would be the odd thing that was quite serious, so we would have to address that. I'm happy to say that the staff and people in charge were very, very good at addressing those situations and correcting any problems that might come up.

For 12 years I heard the good and the bad, but again I'm happy to say that the majority of what I heard was good. The vast, vast, vast majority was good. It was positive. Seniors are well cared for. There are very, very caring staff in these facilities. At least, in the Drayton Valley-Calmar area there are. In fact, I could name some of the staff. They're absolutely outstanding. The care that they provide to the seniors, the love. Literally, they provide love to these seniors like you've never seen. It's as if they're their own relatives.

As I was travelling around and visiting these facilities, I often shared meals with the residents. Again, I have to say that the food was very good. I looked forward to it. I looked forward especially to the Christmas meals and whatnot. Of course, they go a little bit extra during that time, but any time when I would stay, the staff would say: "Pastor, please stay. Join us for supper. Join us for lunch." They had nothing to hide. They wanted the community to be in there, to be visiting, to see what was going on because they were very, very proud of their facilities.

In fact, I was kind of amazed at the cleanliness, Mr. Speaker, the upkeep. You know, as a pastor I kind of wondered where all the dollars were coming from for what seemed like their constant renovations. It seemed like every time I went into a seniors' lodge or a senior's apartment or into some kind of a long-term care facility, there was something new being built or something new going on or some kind of renovation happening. I can remember thinking to

myself: "Wow. They really do keep these buildings up." In fact, the grounds surrounding the buildings are like gardens. People would go to them to get their wedding pictures. They would go there just for the serenity of the beautiful landscaping and the gardens.

In fact, speaking of gardens, some of the facilities in my area, Mr. Speaker, even have community gardens that the residents can go out and plant in. Of course, in the rural areas a lot of the farm ladies were used to going out and planting a garden every year. They made opportunities for them to be able to do this at the seniors' lodges and the long-term care facilities in my area so that the residents could go out and plant some carrots, or they could plant some lettuce. Then they could have the enjoyment of going back later and harvesting their work.

Mr. Speaker, as an MLA now I still visit regularly. Just recently, in fact in the last two weeks, I've had the great opportunity to present two centennial medallions. One was in an auxiliary hospital; the other was in a seniors' lodge. These were residents that were, obviously, over 100 years old, and I'll tell you: they were both happy as could be. In fact, the lady who was 104 that I presented a medallion to last week said that she just loved where she was. The family was all there when I presented the medallion. They praised the care that she was getting and, in fact, credited her longevity to that good care that she was receiving.

I was actually amazed to hear that we had 680 Albertans or more that were 100 years old or older. I thought: boy, there are some people who are being well cared for, whether it's by family or whether it's by the lodges that they're in. In many cases a lot of those people are in some form of government lodge or government-run facility.

So, again, very, very happy people, very, very well cared for. Of course, I visited them all during the election recently, Mr. Speaker. Again, during the election is a time when if the residents are going to complain, trust me: they have free license to do that. Honestly, I heard nothing but good, nothing but positive.

Now, I know what you're thinking. The Auditor General's report certainly points out some of the bad. Well, the fact of the matter is that for the most part all the facilities get virtually the same funding. They have roughly the same dollars to work with. Sure, some have more. Some have less. But if the ones in my area can be well cared for, if they can be well looked after, if the residents can be happy, well, that should be a benchmark. That should be sort of an incentive or some form of a challenge, then, to the other facilities to meet the same standards. They can all do a good job.

I know that some are run by community boards. Some of them have voluntary boards. Some of them have municipal councillors sitting on the boards. Again, those boards are, generally speaking, very good people. A lot of them, I know, have COOs, chief operating officers: well-trained, good people who are definitely willing to listen.

The other point I have to make, Mr. Speaker, is the one that the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul mentioned, and that is waiting lists. I don't know. They think sometimes that we have a magic wand and that they can just come in and, you know, get moved up on the waiting list if they visit their MLA. People are literally trying anything to get into these facilities. There are long waiting lists to get in because people want to live there. Trust me: in rural communities people talk. If things were bad, if the facilities were not good, if the care was not adequate, then there would not be any waiting lists. In fact, there would be vacancies because the word would be out. That's certainly not the case. They have great recreation facilities, as I've mentioned, beautiful landscapes.

Mr. Speaker, as I read the Auditor General's report yesterday, I wished the Auditor General would have come out to my area. We

would be standing here today saying: "Here's the benchmark. Here's the thing we're going to use to praise these facilities." But what did the Auditor General say? Well, he made some recommendations. Look at the first recommendation there. He talks about developing and maintaining standards. Well, what is management's response to that? It says: "Alberta Health and Wellness: Agreed . . . Alberta Seniors and Community Supports: Agreed."

In the second recommendation we look at the management response. "Alberta Health and Wellness: Agreed . . . Alberta Seniors and Community Supports: Agreed."

In the third recommendation, effectiveness of services and long-term care facilities, what was the management response? "Alberta Health and Wellness: Agreed . . . Alberta Seniors and Community Support: Agreed."

Recommendation 4, and on and on and on. Every single one. I looked through this report, Mr. Speaker, and every place where there's a recommendation by the Auditor General, it says: "Alberta Health and Wellness: Agreed . . . Alberta Seniors and Community Supports: Agreed." So what this is telling me is that the government is responding, that the appropriate departments are doing exactly what the Auditor General has asked them to do. They are looking at these facilities and improving the service, improving the care, improving whatever areas need to be improved.

So, Mr. Speaker, I guess I just want to say in conclusion that I am very, very pleased and happy with the facilities in my area. In fact, I challenge all of the facilities in Alberta to come out and use Drayton Valley-Calmor as a benchmark to see how to run a facility well on a reasonable budget. In fact, I challenge the other facilities that need some help to come out and borrow ideas. I know that there are facilities who would be more than happy to lend their ideas on how to make the residents happy and how to offer good care and how to do more with less.

With that, I will take my seat and let other members participate.

5:00

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill, the hon. Member for West Yellowhead, the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne, and the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Mr. Martin: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think it's been proven by the speeches we've had here today why we needed this emergency debate. It's because many of the speakers on the government side, I would say, are in denial. In fact, we had the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation saying that an accountant shouldn't be allowed to go out and investigate because he doesn't know what he's investigating. I found that ironic in view of the fact that there was so much hullabaloo when we were criticizing the Auditor General before. I thought the Government House Leader would rise and defend the Auditor General, and I was surprised that he didn't.

The fact remains that nobody is saying – you can't take one individual institution and say: well, it's bad or it's good. Of course there are some good things going on in some of the long-term care centres. Nobody's saying anything different than that. What the Auditor General has done – and I would say that the Minister of Innovation and Science was correct – is take a representative sample right across the province, and he's saying that there are some serious problems. It should not surprise Members of the Legislative Assembly that he came out with this report. I would think that you would be sleeping or missing what's going on because time and time again seniors' advocates, children of parents in long-term care have been getting ahold of MLAs at least on this side and saying: we have some very serious problems.

That's not to say, again, Mr. Speaker, that we're saying that every institution in the province has problems. Some of them are doing very good work. Generally, the staff are doing very good work across the province. That's precisely the problem, and I think the Auditor General alludes to it: it's patchwork. There are no standards that we can talk about. It varies from one institution to another, and that's what the problem is.

What some of the advocates are worried about is that they've seen this sort of report come forward, and there's some publicity. Everybody's going to do certain things. The ministers are there; they're going to do certain things. And then it goes away, and the people near the end of their life are forgotten. That's a very big concern of theirs. That's why I really appreciate, Mr. Speaker, that we have allowed this debate to occur. I think it's extremely important.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I'd point out that even the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation said: well, the Auditor General's an accountant; he couldn't possibly know what was going on. I wonder how many institutions the minister has been to check and see what's going on. If he doesn't believe the Auditor General, let's look at Lynda Jonson, who presented a petition here. Because she has parents and she thought something was wrong, she visited 100 long-term care facilities.

The Speaker: On a point of order, the hon. Government House Leader.

Point of Order False Allegations

Mr. Hancock: Yes. Mr. Speaker, a point of order on 23(h) and (i): "makes allegations against another member," and "imputes false or unwarranted motives to another member." The Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview indicated that the hon. Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation – the concern that was raised is that the hon. member said that the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation said that the Auditor General was wrong. That's not at all what I heard or what other members of the House heard from the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation. Basically, what he was saying was that – and I'll try and interpret what was being said and paraphrase it – this is a policy issue with respect to the provision of services and that the Auditor General's review was essentially one of process.

So he wasn't calling into account the Auditor General's veracity or ability or any of those things, the things that were being yelled across the floor even when he was making the remarks, but rather commenting on the issue of the report as an auditive process versus an auditive policy.

The Speaker: On this point of order, the hon. leader of the third party.

Mr. Mason: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would argue that this is not, in fact, a violation of those Standing Orders 23(h) and (i) at all. In fact, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview was well within his rights to comment on the minister's comments and to interpret them properly, and he did not in any way attempt to misrepresent the position that the minister took.

The minister, in fact, repeatedly said that he had great problems with the Auditor General's report and specific aspects of the Auditor General's report and gave the very, very strong impression that he thought the Auditor General was not qualified to make some of the recommendations that he did. So the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview is entirely within his rights in pointing that out in his speech.

Mr. Speaker, we'll await your ruling, but I would ask that, of course, this time not be taken from the time of the hon. member's speech.

The Speaker: It's time taken from the Standing Order 30 provision, which the hon. member wanted to have this afternoon, but I'm not letting it stop there. Allegations are going back and forth. I'm going to hear from the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation, and I'm going to hear from the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview on this point of order.

The hon. minister.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As became very apparently clear in the comments that I made in the House today, I questioned the process, and I questioned the Auditor General making comments on process. The Auditor General would have been exactly right when he talked about documentation, when he talked about process, when he talked about not necessarily following all the rules and regulations that are out there. What I brought into question was the issue as to whether or not patient care was compromised.

I felt that in this report one of two things occurred. First of all, there was not a comment on patient care in this report and whether patient care had in fact been compromised. Instead, what is explicitly outlined here is that policies and procedures were not followed. Policies and procedures not being followed does not necessarily equate to patient care being compromised, Mr. Speaker. I think that when people make that judgment, when they make that assessment, they are taking a huge leap of faith. Were there policies that were not? Yeah, there probably were some in some of these institutions. But you should not fault the person and the hard work that is involved in working in a long-term care institution.

Mr. Speaker, in direct reference to the point of order, never once did I say that the Auditor General was wrong in what he said. What I did say, though, is that the connection between patient care and the policy involved is not there and that, therefore, the allegations that were being made in this House were not entirely true.

Mr. Martin: Well, the government gets all sensitive. I was . . .

The Speaker: No, we're not talking about the government. [interjection] Sit down. Sit down. We're talking about an individual point of order and allegations under 23(h) and (i), nothing to do with government. This is a simple little debate. All members this afternoon. There's no government. There's no opposition. The members have 10 minutes each to participate on a motion that the hon. member wanted.

Now we've got a point of order. Let's clarify it, please.

Mr. Martin: Mr. Speaker, what I was referring to, and it was very clear, is that the minister insinuated, I thought, about the process that an accountant – and he used that term – was not able to follow through on these processes. What he was basically saying, as I understood it, was that an accountant should not be able to do this. That's what I was referring to.

5:10

The Speaker: Well, it only goes to point out again and again and again and again that if hon. members stuck with policy and did not mention any other member's name or made comment about them personally, it's amazing how easily this place would just run right along like a well-oiled machine. So let's deal with policy.

I think we clarified this point of order. I did not hear once the hon. Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation criticize the Auditor General. That's the conclusion of that point.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, we have now eliminated one additional member from being able to participate this afternoon. Now continue, please. You've got six minutes and 20 seconds.

Debate Continued

Mr. Martin: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I was continuing to say, other people have been bringing this forward long before the Auditor General. As I was pointing out, Lynda Jonson, who visited 100 long-term care facilities in this province and collected signatures from 4,800 people, talked about this and said that this is a problem throughout. Elder advocate groups are saying the same thing, and they've been saying it for many years. So it was not a surprise to most people that the Auditor General came out with what we think is a very tough, hard-hitting report saying that they were right. As I said, it doesn't say every institution.

Mr. Speaker, she talked about it at a news conference this morning, about seniors who are sitting, waiting for a bath right now as we speak. They'll get one bath this week. She talked about seniors who were woken up, that she's aware of, at 3 or 4 in the morning so that staff would have time to get them up and all dressed for breakfast at 8. She also talked about thousands of seniors who will be put to bed at 7 o'clock tonight, many of them who won't be gotten out of bed until 11 o'clock in the morning, again because hard-working staff just can't get to all the residents. That was at a news conference today from somebody that has visited a hundred places.

The point that we're trying to make is that, you know, as well-meaning as some of the MLAs may be – and I have no doubt of that, Mr. Speaker. But the Auditor General on page 33 says that the Health Facilities Review Committee is basically a waste of time, and he goes ahead: they do not "check for compliance with all Basic Standards," they have "no authority," and they have no medical training.

So the idea that we're going to somehow staff through this particular way, through the MLAs, the Auditor General has already said: no, that does not work. We should be looking for a different way to do it. We should be beefing up. I think the Minister of Innovation and Science alluded to that, and I think he's right, Mr. Speaker. It has to be beefed up. It doesn't have to be MLAs on that particular committee.

We have to have inspections. I believe, Mr. Speaker, that last year, as I recollect, something like only 56 of the 176 long-term facilities, or 32 per cent, received an inspection, as inadequate as the inspection process is. So how can the government say that they are absolutely sure that this problem is not occurring?

Now, I know the ministers have said that they will follow the Auditor General's report, but the point is: when do we deal with this issue again? When do we deal with it again, Mr. Speaker?

I would like to make some suggestions on the staffing. There are no standards for staffing, Mr. Speaker. The numbers aren't there. There are absolutely no rules; that's why we have a patchwork from one institution to another. What we would suggest is that there has to be at least four hours of nursing care per day. Alberta's requirement of 1.9 hours of nursing care per resident per day ranks well below the recommended four hours of nursing care. We have to have standard qualifications for staff, and we have to legislate minimum requirements for the number of people on the staff. Now, some have suggested – maybe the minister can tell us different. Some are calling for 1 to 5 during the day, 1 to 8 at night.

Some other suggestions, if I may – and I'm not sure how much time I have left – some other things that they could look at. A

suggestion has been that each facility have a family council like a parent council at schools because I think one of the things that the Auditor General did say was that people with parents in long-term care have to be concerned. That's what he said when asked: if he were put in, would he not have concerns? Would he put his parents in? That was the question. He said yes, he would, but he would also check that particular institution on a very rigorous basis. So a facility having a family council like a parent council in schools would make an excellent idea, I think.

The other thing that I would suggest is that it's time we had an independent seniors' advocate. Surely, after the Auditor General's report it should be clear to even the government that some sort of advocate for the seniors has to be there. The government can say that they're going to follow up with these recommendations, but as I've said in the past, some of the advocates show that there were investigations and headlines – I remember one going back to '79 with my former colleague Grant Notley involved at that particular time and others in the '80s, '90s. Here we are with another Auditor General's report. The biggest concern that people have after the Auditor General's work and all the work of elder advocates and the rest of it is that the government will accept this – they will say that everything's okay – and then we'll all go back to sleep, and the problems will be the same, you know, three or four years down the way.

I would suggest that there are some things that should happen, and it's not good enough to wait till the fall, Mr. Speaker. I'd say to the minister that we need action plus. This report has come out. The chances are we won't be in the Assembly beyond next week. I don't know why there couldn't be an action plan there . . . [Mr. Martin's speaking time expired]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Nose Hill, followed by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead, followed by the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Dr. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Ensuring that seniors are well cared for and valued members of our society is a very high priority for all of us in this Chamber and not just the members of the opposition. Certainly, best practices in health and personal care and housing are matters that we should strive for as a government, one of the most important priorities, in fact, as a government.

In my riding there is quite a high proportion of seniors. I can certainly say that as I ran for election and came to this Assembly, I expressed my concern for seniors' issues, and I undertook to be a strong voice for seniors' issues in my riding. I want to say that the Alberta government certainly has shown by its record that it holds those priorities of seniors to be very high on its agenda.

Our commitment in Alberta to seniors is second to none in this country. We have the Alberta seniors' benefits, which has the lowest thresholds and the most generous income supports of any program in Canada. Since 2004 there have been a number of enhancements to the programs given to seniors here in Alberta. Hon. members will recall that in 2004 17,000 more seniors were made eligible for the Alberta seniors' benefits, bringing the total to about 117,000. That constituted an increase in budget of about \$50 million for the Alberta seniors' benefits. We also have a unique Alberta Aids to Daily Living program, which is an outstanding program for seniors. Our seniors also receive, of course, free basic Blue Cross coverage, and recently, during the budget process, it was announced that dental assistance for seniors up to \$5,000 coverage every five years and optical coverage up to \$230 every three years would be added to this basket of seniors' benefits. In addition, there

have been improvements to the tax regime such that the education component of property taxes has now been shielded from any further increases for seniors here in Alberta.

I've visited a number of long-term care and seniors' lodges in my riding and in the riding of the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, and I can say that without exception my visits to those facilities have shown that they have a caring and compassionate staff. The quality of accommodation and care is very high, and not only that, Mr. Speaker, but there is a feeling of community in those establishments, a real feeling of belonging, that this is a home for those people. I know that that feeling of community and caring and compassion that is shared amongst the staff and the residents of those particular facilities is an extremely important factor to making those places a quality environment for the seniors.

5:20

I don't want to minimize the fact that there are certain problems in the care of seniors in the long-term care facilities and in the lodges; however, the sky is not falling. By a long shot it's not falling. There are problems, but I know that the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness and the hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Supports both come to this Assembly with strong backgrounds in the health care professions. They are both extremely qualified and dedicated individuals. They're both extremely capable individuals, and I am very confident that they will act expeditiously upon the recommendations made in the Auditor General's report.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead, followed by the hon. Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne.

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to stand today and talk about this subject. I look in my riding and I sort of review the different aspects, especially with the level of care that we've got in our riding. As I look at Edson, which is going to be 94 this year, they were the first ones to have long-term care. Then, of course, with Jasper being close to their hundred years, they have very good care there.

With some of the other younger communities – I can remember that with Grande Cache we had a situation where there was a gentleman that needed extensive long-term care. They were going to send him off to Hythe, which is in the region of Peace Country health, but then he had no support. We were able to make a deal with the regional health authority to designate a room within the hospital to have him stay there so his family could be looking after him as well as the staff.

Then to go on to the care with the seniors, I mean, Grande Cache is a younger community, one of the most modern, picturesque communities I think in the whole of Alberta. What happened there? They got together because there was more need for a lodge, so now they're going to have a lodge in partnership with Peace Country health, and we're going to work together there. So there's another area that is good. We're working on that.

If you go back to Edson, we've got long-term care. We've got a lodge. As the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports said, a lot of the people are aging a lot more, and they're in lodges when they should be in long-term care, but what do we do? We work with the Minister of Health and Wellness. We bring in the people there to help them so that they're able to stay in the surroundings. I believe we need to have aspects where people are aging in place. That's the biggest thing. When you disrupt their surroundings and move them to another place because they've aged a little bit more, you upset them. They don't like change at that age, so you want to work with them.

Sure, I've had a few complaints about the aspect of seniors in my region, especially when they want to go into the long-term care and there's no room. They'll move to my fellow colleague's riding, in Whitecourt-St. Anne. It makes it a little tougher for the people to go and visit them, but still they're being looked after. In this case that I'm talking about, I worked with the people in the area, and sure they were able to move him back once they got a time, a space for him.

I think the other thing is that the Evergreen Foundation in our region has worked very hard with the seniors. I think the positive thing there is that we have elected officials on there, and the elected officials are the town councillors that come from all the different towns and the municipalities in the West Yellowhead riding. They're there. They're the ground people that talk to them.

I've been into the lodges and into the long-term care. My colleague from Drayton Valley-Calmar just spoke about having a 100th birthday anniversary. Well, I had one gentleman there, and we had the community come out. We had the young people come out and visit him. It was very interesting when we presented him with a medal. I proceeded to give him a scroll. Then the newspaper lady asked me if we could take a picture with his medallion, so I asked the co-ordinator of the unit: where did the medallion go? It was interesting to see. You know, we always say about the older people that they're not really thinking well. Well, as soon as I gave this gentleman the medallion and told him that it was gold, he shoved it in his pocket, and I didn't even realize that. When the co-ordinator asked him where his medallion was, the first thing he said to her was: are they going to give it back to me?

When you look at something like that, the gentleman was very happy. They had a beautiful big cake for him. He loved to fish, so they had a fishing scene on there. I mean, the young people talked with him. He was very happy in there, and then all the other people in the long-term care were with him. You know, I'm not standing to say that we don't have certain issues. Sure, we have issues.

I've got another lady that's in Jasper, and it's interesting to know that she's 103. She's the one that plays the piano for the rest of the group there, and she looks after the older people, as she calls them. So, sure, there are different areas.

With the aspect of Grande Cache looking at bringing a lodge there, we went to a lot of different areas within the riding of Spruce Grove-Sturgeon-St. Albert to look at some different facilities there. Also, when we developed Hinton for long-term care, we looked at an area for dementia. I just talked to a lady and her husband from Jasper. They had a relation that was in another region. Now they've brought him back to Hinton in that facility, and they're very happy because what happens is that's a unit where everybody works together. They do their own cooking under the supervision of the staff there. If anybody wants to go and look at the Mountain View Centre in Hinton, it's a multimillion dollar view. They've got the best view in the world. I know that when I was there, when we first were looking at it, I had sort of picked out my room where I'd like to be.

The Speaker: I want to thank the hon. member. I'd like to advise all members that there were 20 participations this afternoon. Some of them were duplicates.

Now, I want to draw all members' attention to Standing Order 58(1) and 58(2). When the House leaves us in about 40 seconds from now, it will reconvene in Committee of the Whole tonight for the estimates. Standing Order 58(1) and 58(2), should there be a procedural question in anticipation of such a thing arriving, would be interpreted that there would be absolutely no violation of any of our Standing Orders if two estimates went back to back.

The House stands adjourned until 8 o'clock.

[The Assembly adjourned at 5:30 p.m.]