

3.8 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Social Security regarding a review of the Income Support system:

In the light of the criticism of the income support system made within the recent draft report commissioned by the Connétable of St. Helier, will the Minister now consider an urgent review of the operation of the Household Medical Account component of income support which was the subject of particular attention within the said report?

Deputy I.J. Gorst of St. Clement (The Minister for Social Security):

I would like to thank the Deputy for asking this question, because it gives me the opportunity to reassure all Members, and in particular all income support claimants, that the income support system remains fully operational and is providing weekly benefits for over 8,000 local households. The income support system does provide appropriate assistance in the form of a regular savings scheme for household medical accounts to help low income families budget for doctors' bills as well as one-off payments to deal with the cost of a bout of illness. The draft report from the Parish of St. Helier covers a number of topics, but provides little evidence on which I could base a decision as to which area needs to be reviewed urgently. I have already written to the Connétable and look forward to meeting him as soon as possible to discuss the concerns of his officers in more detail. I can, however, reassure the Deputy that I am committed to reviewing all the evidence, not only from the Parish of St. Helier, but from any other source including himself, and if changes need to be made to the income support system, then I will not hesitate to make them.

3.8.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

I thank the Minister for his answer and look forward to the changes this year rather than next. Is the Minister aware that, notwithstanding his answer that additional medical cost will be picked up as extra payments, that in one particular case, a person who had been quite ill and received additional visits from her G.P. (general practitioner) phoned the department to be informed that her H.M.A. (Household Medical Account) was £260 in the red, and how was she going to propose to pay this sum back? That response was received from officers in his department.

The Bailiff:

Let us come to the supplementary question, please, Deputy.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is the Minister aware that such practice is going on in his department?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

As I said in my answer, I am absolutely 100 per cent committed to reviewing all the evidence - the evidence which perhaps forms the base of the Deputy's question. As the Deputy is aware, people who are I.S. (income support) claimants or in contact with my department will, in the first instance go to, probably, the customer service desk of the income support team. If they do not get satisfaction then they will request that that decision is reviewed, so it goes up the chain. Ultimately, then the responsibility rests with myself. I ask the Deputy, as I suggested in my answer, that perhaps we need to sit down and go over this evidence to see if changes are required. I am perfectly open. My door is open and I look forward to meeting with him to discuss these cases which, hopefully, will be evidence based.

3.8.2 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Will the Minister be pushing for reform of a system which abrogates the situation where people get free prescriptions but often have to pay £30 plus to somebody to write that prescription? What gaineth a man if he gaineth a free prescription at a cost of £30? Thank you.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I am not sure if the Deputy was in the Assembly when I stood for this office. I gave an undertaking and I stand by that undertaking, that that will form part of my review of this particular area of medical provision, not only for those in need but the public in general. As I said, I do not like to revisit reviews but this is one area that I believe needs to be revisited, and I stand by that commitment.

3.8.3 Senator A. Breckon:

In reference to household medical accounts, I wonder if the Minister could confirm the monies deducted from the client's income support towards the household medical account and accumulated, are indeed a loss if they do not visit the doctor?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

It certainly is not my understanding that the monies are lost. I am aware that this is a particular area which needs consideration and I have asked my officers to do that, because there are some I.T. (information technology) issues around that. But there needs to be a mechanism where people, if over a period of time they have not used that, they have enjoyed good health and the purpose for which the account was set up in the first place is perhaps not needed, those individuals can budget better than they might have imagined that they could at the start or they have not got the medical need, then that does need to be reviewed to enable them to access these funds. Thank you.

Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

If I may, on a point of order, Sir?

The Bailiff:

Yes

Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

You have just refused me a final supplementary, when it was my question. I thought the tradition was that usually the question did revert for a final supplementary to the original asker?

The Bailiff:

Well, if there is time, Deputy, that certainly is the tradition, but you had a supplementary question immediately after you put your question and I do not think ... Well, I am afraid you did, Deputy, I wrote your name down, so that if Members and Ministers could be more succinct I think we will have more supplementary questions. Senator Syvret?