

April 26th 2019

Excerpts from the 2019 Budget Address The Health Sector

Introduction

The recent buzz and interest generated by the official opening of three health facilities here, has provided us with an opportunity to return to the 2019 Budget address delivered by the Minister of Finance, Hon. Camillo Gonsalves. During that address, Minister Camillo Gonsalves provided an overview of the developments which the ULP administration will implement during the year 2019.

It is perhaps instructive to point out that in the year 2001, the New Democratic Party spent just 35 million EC dollars on the health sector. Today, under the ULP administration, that figure is now 80 million EC dollars. Here is the excerpt from the budget address printed below.

As the Vincentian population ages, becomes more affluent, and adopts new lifestyle choices, our expectations and demands of the health sector evolve. New, or increasingly-prevalent, communicable, non-communicable and vector-borne illnesses also beset the Vincentian people. In response, this Government is taking Saint Vincent and the Grenadines through a multi-phase, multisectoral, multimillion-dollar Health and Wellness Revolution that is in the process of radically transforming the healthcare services available to Vincentians.

In July 2018, we opened Modern Medical & Diagnostic Centre (MMDC) in Georgetown. That facility, when coupled with the adjacent Georgetown Smart Hospital, represents a fundamental expansion and decentralisation of high-quality health services in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

In the first six months of its operation, the MMDC received 4,300 Accident & Emergency visits; 1,800 lab visits; performed 4,900 tests; issued 3,700 prescriptions; conducted 1,100 X-rays, 2,500 ultrasounds and EKGs, 140 surgical procedures in the operating theatre; while treating 53 oncology patients (including 11 on chemotherapy) and 22 regular dialysis patients. All of these numbers are expected to rise.

The Honourable Minister of Health and his team deserve accolades for opening, staffing and delivering high-quality hospital services to Vincentians from this superb new facility. This Budget continues our commitment to boost the quality and availability of healthcare in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. It reflects significant investments in infrastructure, manpower and administrative initiatives designed to improve the efficiency of our service. Further, this Budget adopts fiscal measures that further disincentivise the excessive

consumption of alcohol, cigarettes and sugar, whose negative health impacts require no elaboration.

In 2019, we will open new, state-of-the-art polyclinics at Buccament and Mesopotamia. These facilities will further reduce reliance on the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital by offering services ranging from maternity to dentistry to radiology to ophthalmology to urology, and many others.

Combined, these two polyclinics and the one at Stubbs will employ 76 personnel, 65 of whom are trained in the range of medical, nursing and health fields.

In addition to these new polyclinics, renovations are continuing under the SMART hospital initiative funded by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).³¹ A few weeks ago, we completed SMART upgrades to the Chateaubelair clinic. In 2019, we will commence upgrades to clinic facilities in Mayreau, Union Island, Bequia, Stubbs and Barrouallie.

Health Services Expansion

The World Bank-funded design of the 140-bed acute referral hospital at the site of the decommissioned ET Joshua Airport is proceeding satisfactorily, and is expected to be completed by mid-year. Constructing and equipping this ultramodern hospital will cost an estimated US\$50 million. The Government is in the process of securing financing for this important infrastructural anchor for the new city at Arnos Vale.

From a personnel standpoint, the 2019 Budget prudently accommodates our expanding hospital and clinic offerings while buttressing human resources in support of existing services. The Budget provides for 78 additional posts in the health sector, including nurses, doctors and others in the hospital, community health, mental health and laboratory services. Importantly, the Government has decided to address the complaints of suboptimal coordination and delivery of hospital services through the creation of the post of Hospital CEO. This individual will be charged with the management and oversight of the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital, coordination of the different departments, and addressing patient complaints in a responsive manner. The Chief Executive Officer will also be charged with the mainstreaming and implementation of the newly-drafted *Patient's Charter*, which details the responsibilities, obligations and legitimate expectations of patients and providers within our growing healthcare system.

Of course, a hospital is where you go when you are ill or injured. The ultimate objective of a successful healthcare system is to keep you out of the hospital altogether. This 2019 Budget is replete with substantial commitments to nutrition, active lifestyles, education, and other quality-of life initiatives that will support a healthier population. Our increased levies on cigarettes, alcohol, and sugar, should reduce use of these items, or, at the very least, increase revenue to combat the raft of non-communicable diseases that they cause.

Lewis Punnett Home

There is one more developmental initiative in the 2019 Budget that demands mention. For too long, the conditions at the Lewis Punnett Home have been a stain on the collective conscience of all Vincentians. The need for sections of our ageing and geriatric populations to access quality residential health-care services is self-evident. It is similarly self-evident that such services cannot be delivered within the constraints of the existing Lewis Punnett Home.

This Budget therefore provides \$2.1 million for the construction of a temporary facility – at the site of the former Nurses’ Hostel. After the patients are relocated to this temporary facility, we shall demolish and reconstruct a new Lewis Punnett Home, befitting the dignity of our most vulnerable elderly Vincentians. Design work is complete on the temporary facility and we anticipate that the residents of the Lewis Punnett home will be relocated to the temporary facility before the end of the year.