



Speech by

Mr DOUG SLACK

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard 10 November 1999

ELECTIVE SURGERY WAITING LISTS

Mr SLACK (Burnett—NPA) (6.10 p.m.): I formally second the motion before the House moved by the Opposition spokesperson for Health. It gives me no joy to condemn the Minister for Health or the Government in relation to their handling of the Health portfolio.

As the Minister for Health well knows, the people of the Burnett and the Bundaberg region are very dissatisfied with how the Beattie Labor Government is choosing to handle this vital portfolio area. A major budget blow-out in our district health services, which has resulted from a substantial increase in demand across-the-board, particularly in emergency and surgical treatment areas, has been met with the skewed approach of cutting existing services to the bone. This Health Minister has shown a willingness to mislead people over the actual funding situation and has taken a big-stick approach to hardworking health professionals and district health committee members who, after all, have the best interests of patient care utmost in their minds.

At one stage, the Health Department even attempted to axe up to 20 full-time equivalent jobs as a way of dealing with the hospital budget problems. That was an incredibly short-sighted measure that may have looked good on the budget papers for one year, but it created long-term turmoil for Bundaberg. Fortunately, those staff cuts were scuttled after negative publicity when a Health Department memorandum was leaked to the local press and an irate union—I stress, a very irate union. Hardworking staff at the hospital remain on alert for extreme cost-cutting measures that seem to have infiltrated every corner of the hospital's operations, including mental health, outpatients and community health.

One area which continues to cause consternation and which the Health Minister seems to be impervious to community complaint about is the general practice outpatients clinic. That facility closed its doors on 1 October which was, ironically, the International Day of Older Persons. After 45 years of serving Bundaberg and district pensioners, unemployed, and otherwise financially disadvantaged residents, the clinic closed despite a groundswell of public opinion against the decision. As you would know, Mr Speaker, this morning a petition containing over 900 signatures attesting to that fact was tabled in the Parliament. To date, that means that more than 7,000 signatures protesting the closure of the clinic have been tabled in the Parliament. That represents well over—

Mrs EDMOND: I rise to a point of order. What the member is saying is misleading the House. The first 6,000 signatures were about the general outpatient facility—the whole outpatient facility.

Mr SPEAKER: There is no point of order.

Mr SLACK: The Minister continues to deny something that is a fact. We have never misled anybody. The people of Bundaberg who know full well the circumstances that exist in the hospital are the ones who have signed the petitions. Is the Minister saying that she is right and 7,000 people are wrong? That is fine, but that is what the people say.

Mr Beanland: That is arrogant.

Mr SLACK: That is the height of arrogance. The Minister is supposed to listen to the community. Is she listening to the community? She is saying, "I am right and 7,000-plus people are wrong." Is the Minister suggesting that those people do not talk amongst themselves?

Mrs EDMOND: I rise to a point of order. I am not saying that the community is wrong. I am saying that the member opposite is wrong. He is misleading the House. He is telling whoppers in this place. He is talking about petitions on completely different things. He misled the people of Bundaberg.

Mr SLACK: The Minister is debating the issue. The Health Minister may harp on the fact that one clinic that bulk bills has opened in Bundaberg, but that was only discovered after the decision to close the GP clinic was made. It is totally inadequate for a city of 45,000 people.

As the seriousness of the general practitioner shortage in Bundaberg looms, it may well be time for the Health Minister to revisit this ill-considered decision to close the general practice outpatients clinic. Very credible figures supplied to me by the Bundaberg division of general practice show that by the end of this year there will be one general practitioner to service about 2,000 people.

Mrs Edmond: Have you written to Wooldridge about it?

Mr SLACK: The Minister is going to blame the Commonwealth now. Traditionally, we have had about 60 GPs and soon we will have about 40 GPs. When one compares that to the average in Brisbane, which is one practitioner to every 500 to 600 patients, one can see how chronic and dangerous this shortage could become. With a large number of long-term Bundaberg general practitioners now due to retire, and as most doctors have closed their books to new patients for years anyway, the Health Department could not have picked a worse time to cost-shift its responsibility to the private sector. That is what this is about.

In the past 12 months, my electorate officer and I have dealt with more complaints relating to cost-cutting measures at the Bundaberg Base Hospital than ever before.

Time expired.
