



Speech by

Mr DOUG SLACK

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard 24 November 1999

HEALTH LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr SLACK (Burnett—NPA) (2.42 p.m.): I will not speak for very long to this Bill, except to endorse the remarks made by the Opposition spokesperson and to support the Bill. I have sat on a hospital board for several years and, like many speakers before me, I have experienced the problems caused by a lack of doctors in the bush. Although we all know that that is a problem for those areas, we find that that problem is being experienced in the more populated, provincial cities on the coast. That is a great concern. Recently, I received a letter from a private practitioner in Bundaberg who stated that, currently, there are 60 doctors servicing the Bundaberg population of about 50,000. The letter stated further that, in round figures, that number of doctors was expected to drop to 40 by Christmas, which would mean a blow-out in the ratio of one doctor per 1,400 or 1,500 to one doctor per 2,000 people. When one considers the attributes of a city such as Bundaberg, which is close to the coast, not far from Brisbane and all of those sorts of things, it must be a real concern to the Minister and the Health Department—as it is to all the people in that particular area—that the problem of getting doctors to go into the bush has now extended to regional provincial centres. No doubt, doctors and Health Department officials could advance many reasons for why there is a shortage of doctors in those areas.

I know that all political parties recognise this problem and are attempting to do something about it. In that regard, I refer to the Doctors for the Bush scheme. Although that scheme helps to address the problem of the shortage of doctors in the bush, it is not going to solve that problem. In my book, it is a stopgap measure that provides some relief and alleviates a problem. However, the problem is ongoing and I believe that we need other measures. I know that the Minister recognises that.

I would also like to say that, although many speakers before me have congratulated the Minister on her initiative in this legislation, I dispute the fact that it was the Minister's initiative. Although I compliment the Minister on supporting the Commonwealth's scheme, I do not think that the Minister could claim credit for the scheme as such.

Mrs Edmond: Yes, I can. Our scheme is asking the other States to follow it.

Mr SLACK: I take on board what the Minister has said.

Mrs Edmond: The Commonwealth is following our scheme.

Mr SLACK: I have posed the question on the record, and I accept the Minister's answer.

The specific reason that I rose to speak to this Bill relates to the matter of the definition. In the Minister's second-reading speech, she stated—

"The Commonwealth has made it clear that unrestricted provider numbers will not be granted under the scheme to overseas trained doctors in provincial centres and that other strategies will need to be developed to address shortages of general practitioners in those centres.

...

The Act is to be amended to provide that the Minister may decide there is an 'unmet area of need'. The amendments clarify in what circumstances the Minister may make such a decision."

Then in the Bill itself—and no doubt this will come up during the Committee stage— reference is made to the circumstances in which the Minister may make a decision as to what constitutes an area of need. The Bill states—

"... the Minister may decide there is an unmet area of need relating to a medical service if the Minister considers there are insufficient medical practitioners practising in the State or part of the State to provide the service at a level that meets the needs of people living in the State or the part of the State."

The member for Gladstone has asked how the Minister is going to apply that clause. For instance, if one can demonstrate that, in a city the size of Bundaberg—which is developing an acute shortage of doctors—overseas doctors are prepared to go there or are there already, could their period of stay in that area be extended through an exemption granted by the Minister in terms of this clause? I ask the Minister: how will this clause apply in those particular circumstances?

I can appreciate, as can no doubt the other members of the House, that if that provision is used widely one could run into the problem referred to by the member for Charters Towers, that is, if the terms of this clause are extended to apply to provincial city areas, then obviously we are going to have more difficulty getting those same doctors who would qualify under this scheme to service areas such as Richmond, Hughenden, Gayndah, Eidsvold, or wherever. I can see Doctor Stable nodding. He understands the problem, as we all do.

The point that I am really making is that the problem of a shortage of doctors is developing in provincial cities. So we need measures by which we can encourage doctors to go into those areas. Where there is an acute shortage developing or there are special circumstances, could the provisions of this Bill apply?

I support the Bill and commend the Minister for her efforts to tackle this problem that the Commonwealth, the State and the other parties involved have tried to work through.
