



Speech by

Mr DOUG SLACK

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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QUEENSLAND HEALTH

Mr SLACK (Burnett—NPA) (6.09 p.m.): In seconding the motion, I am delighted that the secret master plan of the Beattie Labor Government on health has been unmasked. It certainly explains why I have been subjected to such an unprecedented level of hysteria from members opposite in my campaign to have the serious funding inadequacies at the Bundaberg District Health Service addressed fairly and genuinely.

In the past seven months, I have fought, at every step, the senior health bureaucracy at the highest level to put a halt to the degradation of services in my region resulting from a \$2m shortfall at the Bundaberg Hospital. Some of the issues which have caused the most discomfort to the Health Minister have included my efforts to halt: the attempt to withdraw dental health emergency care at Childers; the closure of the highly regarded outpatients general practice clinic—which almost 6,000 people have protested against in the form of a petition; the raiding of \$200,000 of coalition-instigated mental health funds—halfway through the funding year—to prop up an administrative shortfall at the hospital; the blowout of dental health waiting times by 11 months in the past year to a staggering four-year waiting list; the blowout in waiting times for specialist outpatients such as orthopaedics, physiotherapy and occupational therapy; and the leaked plan to axe the equivalent of up to 20 full-time jobs at Bundaberg.

The Bundaberg Base Hospital has lurched from crisis to crisis as a direct result of the serious operating budget shortfall. There has been a dramatic increase in demand at the accident and emergency ward without a commensurate increase in nursing staff. The highly professional and able workers at the hospital are being put under tremendous pressure. I pay them every compliment for the job that they are doing.

I have never had so many constituents contact me with problems related to prolonged waiting times. Some of them have had their operations booked and cancelled three times and are still waiting. One lady, who was unable to access occupational therapy as an outpatient, has sustained permanent damage. I understand that physiotherapy and orthopaedic waiting times—people with often very painful conditions—are now measured in months.

How have the Beattie Government and the new member for Bundaberg handled this significant challenge? Other than pointing to the bricks and mortar building program, which the coalition fully acknowledges—we in fact approved these works—how has this Government responded to the desperate need to increase staffing and resource levels? It has embarked on a campaign of downsizing by stealth, a campaign of constant denials, misrepresentations both inside and outside this House, and personal attacks on me which culminated recently with the attempt to kick me out of Bundaberg with the express purpose of gagging me in my efforts to represent my electors.

The Health Minister's other attempt to put out the bushfire at Bundaberg was the orchestration of a dishonest and cynical rescue package which was as useless to the hospital in reducing its deficit as it was as a public relations exercise because my electorate did not buy it. The people of Bundaberg did not buy it. This is a disgraceful and arrogant approach to the genuine concerns and the genuine needs of my region.

After all these months of denying outpatients closure, we find that the Beattie Labor Government had adopted this approach as policy. In addition to other regional outpatients facilities

which have been closed without public consultation, the Government now intends to slash 40 outpatients clinics from the Royal Brisbane Hospital. As coincidence would have it, this is the very recommendation of the Queensland Health Strategy Advisory Project—the one from which the Government is trying, so hopelessly, to distance itself.

In this report, the recommendation is to identify outpatient services that could be delivered from the doctor's rooms. The report states—

"There is no reason to perpetrate the notion of 'public' patients in relation to medical consultations."

This is exactly the wording that the Health Minister has been parroting for many months in relation to the outpatients closure at Bundaberg. It is time that this Government restored those services already cut and abandoned plans to further rationalise this State's health system.
