



Speech by

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MENTAL HEALTH

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (12.10 p.m.): This State is facing another looming health crisis. This time, the looming calamity is in the mental health arena where precious dollars allocated to mental health services continue to be used as a quick fix for other budgetary problems within the State health system. There is a desperate need to check this funding haemorrhage that is draining vital adolescent and adult mental health care programs of much-needed funding. It is immoral to utilise these vitally needed funds to prop up administrative shortfalls or to cover up mismanagement in the district health services.

In the last few days this funding pillage was highlighted once again by the revelations that a special mental health package of \$1.1m, which was funded by the coalition Government to employ 11 additional mental health workers in the areas of youth, child and adult services in the 1998-99 year in the Bundaberg district, has not been spent as originally intended. As discovered by my colleague the member for Burnett, Doug Slack, the funding year in question is over but only eight of the 11 additional workers have had their appointments finalised and there have been unnecessary delays in advertising for a key psychiatrist. Where has the money gone?

This morning Health Minister Wendy Edmond clearly misled the Parliament when she claimed that mental health funds were quarantined in the districts. I refer the Parliament to yesterday's Bundaberg News-Mail, which outlines how approximately \$200,000 that was earmarked to prevent youth suicide and employ extra mental health workers was diverted to prop up a \$1m shortfall at the Bundaberg Base Hospital. The article states—

"A spokeswoman for Ms Edmond confirmed \$200,000 was transferred from mental health services and Queensland Health contributed the difference as part of a million-dollar rescue package for the hospital.

The one-off government funding 'won't have to be paid back', while the \$200,000 was diverted from mental health because only seven of the 11 new positions were filled before the end of the 1998-99 financial year."

The mental health money was diverted to fill the Bundaberg Hospital's black hole earlier this year, well before the end of the financial year and well before some of these unfilled mental health positions were even advertised. The Minister has misled the House. Clearly a sleight of hand was used to take money out of mental health and divert it to prop up hospital shortfalls.

We have to ask the question: where else in the State is this happening? We must ask that question because if we have evidence that it has happened in Bundaberg, despite the fact that the Minister is denying it—her spokesperson seems to know about it, so either she does not know about it or she is not admitting to it—where else in the State is it happening? Where else is the Beattie Labor Government issuing grand press releases about funding for mental health services while real funding is being quietly nicked to bail out other services and cover up high-level mismanagement?

I call on the Beattie Government, as it works up its next Budget, to ensure that mental health funding is significantly increased and the delivery of mental health services is given top priority. Mental health was a priority area of the coalition Government. However, the coalition Government inherited the lowest per capita mental health expenditure in Australia at \$45, which was 18% less than the national average of \$55. Under the Goss Labor Government, funds were withdrawn from the mental health program at regional and service levels with no mechanism to ensure replacement funding.

To provide an example, between 1992 and 1993 \$1.8m of new funding was provided through the mental health branch, but mental health expenditure increased by only \$500,000. With Queensland's population growth, that actually resulted in a fall in per capita expenditure from \$46 to \$45. That gross mismanagement by the Goss Labor Government meant that Queensland was at risk of contravening the Medicare agreement. That so concerned then Federal Health Minister Carmen Lawrence that in June 1995 she wrote to her Queensland State Health counterpart, Jim Elder, expressing her concerns in this regard.

Once again, what do we witness? The Beattie Labor Government has returned to the bad old days of the health mismanagement of the Goss Government and is withdrawing vital funding from a seriously depleted health sector. This is scandalous mismanagement and it is obscene. Some of the most vulnerable people in the State are not being given the urgent attention that they need because this Government is shovelling money into district budget black holes.

The coalition Government was committed to improving mental health through better facilities and funding. As well as boosting funding for mental health services, in its last Budget brought down on 14 May 1998, the coalition boosted mental health funding by a \$27m increase in recurrent funding which was to provide staff, new acute mental health units and increased mental health services. Additionally, the coalition Budget provided \$20m for capital improvements to mental health facilities across the State. It was a record level of funding that highlighted the coalition's commitment to improving mental health services throughout Queensland. Most importantly, under the coalition Government a ministerial directive was given that the mental health budget be identified and quarantined in the service agreements between corporate office and district health services.

It is imperative that the State mental health program be given top priority once again and that mental health funding is not threatened in order to meet other sector or administrative shortfalls. Withdrawing mental health dollars to prop up other sector shortfalls or to cover up mismanagement is tantamount to stealing. It simply must not be allowed to occur again.

Funding debacles as witnessed in Bundaberg must also not be allowed to occur again. The residents of Bundaberg are missing out on much-needed funding and services. Providing support for youth and adults in crisis helps to prevent or reduce the number of attempted suicides, incidents of self-harm and substance abuse, and the worsening physical conditions of affected people. Preventive measures have previously led to reductions in medical admissions, which is tantamount to providing the ambulance at the top of the cliff rather than at the bottom.

Under the coalition Government, the 12-bed Adolescent Health Unit at the Royal Brisbane Hospital—which was, incidentally, widely announced by the former Goss Government although no funding was provided for it, so it could not be operational— was allocated \$1.45m and became operational in July 1997. The Adolescent Health Unit was an important step forward in providing specialised care to young Queenslanders aged between 12 and 18 years. To provide the House with an indication of the demand and need for the unit, I point out that in the first five months of its operation more than 60 children were admitted and treated for eating disorders, self-harming behaviour and suicide, conduct disorders, schizophrenia and psychotic episodes and drug-induced psychoses. As well, the unit provided a truly Statewide service through the use of telephone and telemedicine facilities. Adolescence is a very difficult time and it is important that we as a humane society provide services that meet the needs of young people aged between 12 and 18 years.

Other areas that need to be targeted include training for health staff to meet the needs of young people, better coordination between services and encouraging more young people to access health services. However, none of those vitally important services and actions can be undertaken or implemented if funding is constantly withdrawn. In the area of mental health, there is still much work to be done. Even with the massive injection of funding provided by the coalition Government, mental health services in Queensland remain the most poorly funded in Australia. It is imperative that this Labor Government displays a commitment to the most vulnerable people in our society and promises to deliver boosted and quarantined— really quarantined—mental health funding in its next Budget.

In order to meet our obligations to national benchmarking under the 10-year national mental health strategy, as well as our ethical obligation to the people in most need, it is crucial to further our commitment to mental health. It is not the time to let the gains made by the coalition Government leach away by allowing previously announced funding allocations to be siphoned off into administrative black holes, as we have seen in Bundaberg under the Labor Minister. Today I call on the Beattie Government to ensure that mental health funding is significantly increased and that the delivery of mental health services be given top priority. I also call on the Health Minister to immediately quarantine mental health funding to prove that her commitment to mental health is not just loose lip-service.
