



Speech by

## Miss FIONA SIMPSON

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

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Hansard 9 December 1999

### PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE Backflow Prevention Programs

**Miss SIMPSON** (Maroochydore—NPA) (10.19 a.m.): The quality of our drinking water is of paramount importance, but in hospitals where patients are already sick and vulnerable, it is critical. The Queensland Health Department has failed its duty of care to ensure the highest protection of drinking water quality in its hospitals. The Public Works Committee's inquiry into backflow water contamination issues in the public sector has resulted in a non-unanimous report, with Government members happy about the Government's performance on the issue and non-Government members unable to pursue matters, resulting in the dissenting report. We even had a Labor member last week giving fulsome praise to the Public Works Minister, which was very interesting.

Despite the report being split down party lines, and lacking an apparently fulsome investigation of the issue, the committee's report has still confirmed that the Health Department did not put in place a risk-based management process to speedily identify high risk sites, nor had it put in place an expeditious program of rectification. This was despite the backflow water contamination hazards being identified in a Government-commissioned report *Protecting Your Drinking Water*, handed to the Beattie Labor Government in August 1998, with recommendations for urgent action and with Statewide audits to be completed within six months followed by rectification works based on risk.

During the Public Works Committee hearings, the Health Minister, Wendy Edmond, revealed that she had not even read the *Protecting Your Drinking Water* report, despite publicity about its findings of potentially lethal water contamination hazards in several State health facilities. Since then, the Health Department has not provided any public evidence of a timely Statewide audit of its facilities to identify all high-risk sites, nor has it provided evidence that high-risk sites have had their problems rectified as a matter of priority. The majority committee report accepted the Health Department's assertions that backflow health risks in its facilities were low, despite an independent audit of just four sites showing that two of those four sites had high risks as classified under the Australian standards. I am astounded that the Health Department and this Labor Health Minister have such contempt for what the Australian standards classify as a high-risk backflow hazard. The Health Department pronouncing itself safe is a case of Caesar judging Caesar.

The Beattie Labor Government has shown the same contempt for the independent watchdog on Health Department standards, the Chief Health Officer. The Chief Health Officer's powers under 17 statutes were removed and handed to the Director-General of the Health Department, which is an organisational conflict of interest. I quote from some sections of the committee's report where there are conflicts in its own determinations. It states—

"Queensland Health has advised the committee that it is now developing a new in-house risk management approach which will incorporate backflow prevention."

But on the same page of the report, it says—

"The committee is unable to make further comments on the efficiency of other backflow works undertaken by Queensland Health."

On page 8, the report states—

"The committee concludes that Queensland Health's asset management program is an effective means of managing backflow risks ..."

Time expired.

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