



Speech by

Mr ROB MITCHELL

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

Hansard 24 November 1999

HEALTH LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr MITCHELL (Charters Towers—NPA) (2.36 p.m.): I will speak briefly to the Health Legislation Amendment Bill of 1999 and specifically to the amendments to the Medical Act in relation to rural doctors. I will not cover the ground already covered by previous speakers. We know the problems that exist. This legislation is a great attempt to cover many of the anomalies in the bush. I am pleased to see these amendments to the legislation. I believe they will alleviate the problems we have currently with shortages of doctors in rural and remote Queensland. It has always been difficult to attract doctors to those areas. It seemed that overseas doctors were the only ones interested in doing time in the bush. We do get some Australian doctors out there, but it is very difficult. Overseas doctors were restricted, because by law they were unable to be registered to practise without geographical restrictions or to obtain permanent residency status unless they passed the examinations set by the Australian Medical Council. That was in addition to the main hurdle of not being able to obtain an unrestricted Medicare provider number until 10 years after they commence to practise in Australia.

I am very pleased with the Doctors for the Bush scheme that has been initiated by Queensland Health and the Commonwealth Government. I acknowledge the efforts of the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr John Anderson, in assisting to cut through some of the red tape at a Federal level to see this scheme become a reality. I am sure it will go a long way towards solving some of the problems in the bush.

Over the past few years, the Charters Towers electorate has been affected on many occasions by not being able to retain doctors in the smaller centres, mainly Julia Creek and Richmond. We have even had problems attracting full-time doctors and other medical staff to Charters Towers, which is far from remote. I am sure the new scheme will work towards solving those problems. I am surprised that people think that once one is above the range one is in rural Queensland. Charters Towers is only 120 kilometres from the coast. It is not a bad place to live if anyone wants to come and join us there. Only four months ago, we lost a doctor in Richmond. The current doctor was to relieve until a decision was made about provider numbers. The doctor really liked Richmond and was very keen to stay. However, he was also offered a position in Western Australia where apparently legislation was already under way. The town of Richmond was in an uproar. When the doctor advised that he was heading to Western Australia for an interview, which he duly did, my phone was running hot for a good day and a half. Three days later I visited every business house in town and a few people down the street. The only topic of discussion was retaining the doctor. He was well liked and he liked the place, too. However, we thought there was that little problem.

I must thank Queensland Health for their quick response to my letter on behalf of the community of Richmond, stating that the legislation would be in place as soon as possible and giving us a guarantee that, on his return from his interview in Western Australia, our doctor in Richmond would remain with this guarantee that, come January, we would have something in place. The Minister and her department have acted quickly and I am very, very happy with that. I can say that we have a very happy community in Richmond because of those actions.

I must admit that I thought the situation had been fixed a few years ago. However, once I looked into it a bit, I realised that there was only a temporary provider number for locums when relieving in these centres. So it was a surprise to me, when I started getting these phone calls, that this was

actually happening. I am also pleased to see that this scheme is specifically for the bush—at this stage, anyway—and is not to be expanded to provincial centres. It guarantees that a doctor will serve a five-year stint in rural communities. That will ensure the continuity of medical services for the people in these towns.

I wish to put on record my sincere thanks to all the doctors and all the other medical staff who work in rural communities. As has been said before, on numerous occasions they have to work in very adverse conditions, for very long hours and in circumstances that are well and truly above the call of duty to provide a wonderful service to rural and remote Queensland.

I believe that the rural doctors' training centre, which will be incorporated in the new Townsville Hospital in conjunction with James Cook University, will in the future alleviate these staff problems that we have been having in rural and regional and northern Queensland. In the meantime, through this legislation, overseas doctors will now be able to fill this void—which has always been there and has always been a problem— permanently. Once again, I thank the Minister and Queensland Health for their swift action to see this anomaly rectified and to retain our doctor in Richmond. I commend the Bill to the House.
