



Speech by

## Miss FIONA SIMPSON

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

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Hansard 18 July 2000

### PUBLIC HOSPITAL SYSTEM

**Miss SIMPSON** (Maroochydore—NPA) (12.07 p.m.): Premier Peter Beattie has let the people down by his appalling mismanagement of the hospital system and his failure to put in place a Minister who can do the job. He has let the people of Queensland down by leaving negotiations at a critical stage to swan around overseas while his Health Minister went bush and hid from public view. The bureaucrats in the Health Department have been left to issue his arrogant edicts by proxy about how enterprise bargaining should be done. The workers have been told to like it or lump it.

As I have received calls from blue-collar health workers through to longstanding medical specialists, it has become apparent to me that the massive upheaval in the public hospital system through protracted industrial action may have caused permanent damage. There are good people leaving the system who will be almost impossible to replace. The ongoing turmoil is a symptom not only of the poorly handled industrial dispute but also of a greater unhappiness in the public health service because of the wrong priorities of this Government, such as its \$280m Lang Park redevelopment. There are some very hardworking and dedicated health staff who have simply had enough.

Some cannot afford to quit their jobs; they are already casuals with limited prospects of permanent job security and, thus, limited options of buying a car or a house—things that permanency brings. Others, such as one Brisbane specialist with 20 years' experience of working in the public system, have the choice to move out of the public sector and work exclusively in the private sector. This particular specialist told me of his despair in seeing cutback after cutback and an impossible working environment so that he has chosen, as have many others like him, to leave the system. These are people with highly specialised skills that the public health system needs in order to function. No doubt in a few months Health Minister Edmond will blame the medical profession for the blow-out in the surgical waiting lists and the lack of specialists willing to work in the public hospital system.

The one thing that Health Minister Edmond is good at doing is blaming other people. We saw it in this Chamber this morning during question time. She will blame the doctors, the workers and the unions. I have even heard her in this Parliament blame patients when confronted with problems which they wait in vain for her to fix. Notably, the Health Minister blamed the health unions for the current dispute, one of the worst industrial bunfights the Health Department has seen. She said that it was the unions' fault for the delay in finding a resolution, not her fault or the department's fault. She said that union claims had not been lodged until a few months ago, yet the Combined Health Union newsletter tells a different story. The union newsletter outlines how its claims were lodged in December last year and how there have been constant delays and stonewalling from high levels of the Health Department. The Health Minister is quick to blame the unions and once again not fix the problem.

One of the concerns in negotiations is when the new agreement will be dated from. As the previous agreement expired at the end of March this year, workers quite rightly expect a new agreement to be backdated to April this year. I call on the Government to ensure that the agreement is dated from the previous agreement's expiry date and not to keep holding out for a later commencement date. However, this dispute is about more than just wages. As I mentioned earlier, casual workers employed in that capacity for years have been given no glimmer of hope of permanent status. Permanency would allow them to get on with their lives and do the things that people in permanent jobs take for granted, such as buying a house. Many a bank manager would laugh at a casual employee asking for a loan. The Health Minister claims that she has offered job security, but this

issue is unresolved and more needs to be done to provide a career path and security for long-term staff.

Training is another important aspect of this agreement. It must not be at the whim of district budgets but requires additional resources. However, one of the biggest issues in the health system is a lack of staff in many key areas, not because staff are not available, as the Minister claims, but because funding has not been made available for staff or support staff needed for the team to do the job. Four doctors recently left the Mount Isa Hospital, and that will mean the closure of the outpatients clinic. I note that the editorial of the local paper, which refers to the Senate inquiry, criticises the fact that this Government has been big on putting money into the bureaucracy end and not the service delivery end.

The Health Department's focus has been on building a bigger bureaucracy and giving the men in black with calculators generous bonuses whilst ignoring the engine room of the Health Department—the operational staff. No doubt the Health Minister will make claims later today about nursing staff levels in the department and the fact that numbers are increasing. However, she refuses to provide a breakdown of administrative positions versus operational staff, just as she refused to do last financial year. People no longer believe the Minister when she claims that there are more operational staff and that the number of administrative staff has not grown. We know that administrative staff and the bureaucracy are growing out of sight. We want to see proof rather than press releases and spin from the spin doctors.

The current strikes will also be used to blame the unions for the blow-out in surgical waitlists. Whilst the strikes will have affected lists, there was skulduggery with hospital budgets at the end of the financial year and cutbacks to surgical lists which have had nothing to do with the dispute. I am concerned when I hear that the Mater Children's Public Hospital cancelled elective surgery for the month of June this year with the exception of a few ENT cases. This is an incredible situation which had nothing to do with the industrial dispute. For several weeks Princess Alexandra Hospital surgeons were told not to operate overnight on complex cases that required long periods in surgery—another unprecedented situation which had nothing to do with the industrial dispute.

Perhaps the Health Minister is going to laugh off these incidents, which is the Beattie Labor Government's standard response when it is caught out when the truth comes out. Perhaps I am old fashioned, but I believe that we should tell the truth. It disturbs me that this Labor Government is creating a climate of dishonesty and is making it very difficult for those many public servants who are honest, hard working and independent who do not want to compromise their ethics.

I want to refer to another area of patient care which has been affected by the strikes. This morning the Minister talked about cancer services but did not mention the fact that a specialist outpatient clinic at the Royal Brisbane Hospital was cancelled a week ago—this clinic was held once a week for special diagnostics for people with suspected head and neck tumours—adding further delay to people getting timely and appropriate access to services to treat those cancers. That will have a very real impact upon patient care, yet the Minister has said nothing. She has been hiding when it comes to dealing with this industrial dispute.

The Minister may say that these strikes are acceptable or normal, but they are not. They did not occur under the previous coalition Government when it negotiated with the unions. Ongoing work bans are also placing great strain on existing systems. However, I do not want to see this dispute used as an excuse to explain away the problems that have occurred under this Government with a lack of staffing and a lack of attention to detail instead of putting funds into the sharp end of service delivery. Instead, this Government has brought about a new layer of bureaucracy with zonal managers. This Beattie Government has very quickly become arrogant and done exactly what the Goss Government did—building up the upper levels of bureaucracy at the expense of service delivery and giving expensive bonuses for top-level bureaucrats whilst workers at the grassroots level do not have permanent jobs.

We need more doctors and nurses, more allied health workers and more reasonable compensation for their efforts, particularly in rural and remote areas. We do not need the new bureaucracy that this Government is building. As with the failed regional health structures introduced by the Goss Government which grew within six years to disgustingly fat proportions, the same will happen with the zonal management system, a system that did not previously exist. Despite assurances from the Minister, three new zonal managers were appointed with hefty salaries of \$185,000 to squeeze hospitals to cut services even further in order to meet unreasonable budgets. The Government's appalling mismanagement of one of the most important engine rooms of community care is damaging our public health system.

Time expired.

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