



Speech by

**Mr ROB MITCHELL**

**MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS**

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Hansard 23 August 2000

**APPROPRIATION BILL, ESTIMATES COMMITTEE D**

**Mr MITCHELL** (Charters Towers—NPA) (4.49 p.m.): I rise to speak briefly to the report from Estimates Committee D with reference to the Health area. Even though I was not present at the Estimates committee, I wish to raise some health issues. As everybody knows, the Health portfolio is the most important area of service delivery which affects the quality of life for nearly all Queenslanders. Health commands one of the largest budgets of \$3.813 billion and oversees a work force somewhere in the vicinity of 60,000 full-time and part-time workers. I believe that it is critical that Queenslanders have access through the parliamentary process to transparent and accountable information to demonstrate that the standard of service delivery meets the needs and that actual funding allocations are spent in areas of real priority.

However, as is the case with most Budget papers, I notice that there is simply not enough information contained within the Health documents to provide a detailed account of the programs and subprograms where the bulk of the funding has been allocated. No matter who holds the reins in this portfolio, they will always be confronted with issues such as service delivery, staffing levels, which is a primary area, transportation of patients and general improvements in infrastructure to maintain a high level of patient care.

This year, Charters Towers will see the completion of the psychogeriatric unit at Eventide that has been funded over the past two years. This will further enhance the quality of life for its residents, because the remodelling of the units will enable those people to remain in that area. The redevelopment at Mosman Hall is well on the way. Mosman Hall will remain a 24-bed rehabilitation dual diagnosis and transition unit with the allocation of \$3.8m. Mosman Hall, as we now know it, will be sold off for other purposes. It owns some 77 hectares which can be sold off. It will be a sad day when we finally see the closure of this old institution, because it has been an institution in every sense of the word and a tremendous facility in north Queensland for over 50 years.

Staffing levels remain the major problem in my part of the State. I visit most hospitals throughout my electorate and staffing is the main issue consistently raised with me. I know that it has been hard to attract staff to rural and regional Queensland, particularly RNs. Most hospitals west of Charters Towers, in Mount Isa and in central Queensland—and I recently visited Aramac with my colleague Vaughan Johnson—have to rely mainly on agency nurses who stay for only three to four months at a time. This makes it very difficult for the local resident staff to plan their lives, their holidays and even manage their days off because of the shortage of staff for a full week's shifts.

I believe that Queensland Health may have to initiate further incentive schemes to attract a more permanent work force to these areas. Similar initiatives offered by the Education Department in rural and remote Queensland over the past few years have met with relative success since being put in place, and I believe they are working reasonably well. This area needs to be looked at if we are to attract professional health people to these areas. I have been fortunate, though, to see an upgrade of accommodation at Julia Creek and the planned upgrades at Richmond. I believe this will assist greatly in attracting staff to these centres. However, we still need the financial carrot to attract them to these areas in the first place. It is just a matter of getting them there by some sort of initiative or financial carrot. Once there, hopefully we can keep them there with the continuing upgrade of living conditions.

Another area of concern is the need to attract dental services staff to country areas. My colleague the member for Maroochydore mentioned this issue earlier. Basically, this is the situation pretty well all over Queensland. More funding is needed to deliver a dental service on a more regular basis to many remote towns. It astounds me that we have problems attracting medical and dental staff to Charters Towers. For heaven's sake, Charters Towers is only 130 kilometres from Townsville, yet people still think it is remote. This is a difficult issue. I do not know how we are going to get around it. I do not have the answers. However, this is something that Queensland Health has to stay abreast of in order to attract people to outlying areas, even Charters Towers at this stage. The same sorts of problems are experienced in the Central Highlands, and that is only a hop, skip and a jump from major centres. It is very frustrating that we cannot attract people.

In the short time I have left, I give special thanks to the Minister for Education for all his assistance through the All Souls and St Gabriels saga earlier this year.

Time expired.

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