



Speech by

BONNY BARRY

MEMBER FOR ASPLEY

Hansard 16 April 2002

AGED CARE NURSES

Ms BARRY (Aspley—ALP) (7.16 p.m.): For honourable members and indeed for most of the community it is hard to imagine what it must be like to work as an aged care nurse. To go to work every day and care for the frailest, most vulnerable members of society is an exercise in compassion, skill, patience, tolerance and caring that few of us could comprehend for one day, let alone day after day, year after year. Thousands of aged care nurses in Queensland do this every day and for many it is a commitment for life—a commitment to ensuring that the final years of our oldest citizens are spent in an environment of dignity and respect, with the provision of quality nursing care as a basic right.

The worst of days for an aged care nurse is when you do not have time to care for people in a way that you would consider personally and professionally acceptable; a day when you left someone in a wet bed too long simply because there were too many others to change. You rushed a person's feed or, worse, you did not get them fed because there were too many to feed. You were late with the pills because there were too many pills to give.

The worst of days is when you find the frailest of your residents on the floor, hurt, because you were not there. The worst of days is when your resident dies alone because you were not there. You were not there because the other 30 to 500 residents under your care in a Queensland nursing home kept you just a bit too long. The worst of days start when you know your licence to practise nursing is at risk because you cannot do your job properly. It finishes on the way home when you realise what you did not get done and that tomorrow it will be just as bad.

I am saddened to tell the House that the claim by the Queensland Nurses Union to insert a minimum staffing ratio and skills mix into the Nurses Interim Aged Care Award has been dismissed by the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission this week. The claim was an attempt by the union to assist its members with their workload burden in aged care. In all honesty, the commission's decision has been a blow to the Queensland Nurses Union and its members, and it will be a great disappointment.

The claim was dismissed not because the courageous nurse witnesses from aged care could not articulate the ever-increasing workloads placed upon them from increased patient acuity and unreasonable work demands from the federal government, but it was lost, in part, because there was no reasonable prospects that the federal government would fund any additional reimbursements if the staffing ratios and skills mix were allowed. It is a sad reality that the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission recognised workload burdens increases and it recognised documentation burdens, but it did not move to alleviate the burden because it knows the Commonwealth would not fund it.

It means that Queensland nurses will once again bear the burden of providing care with inadequate staffing and skills mix. They will continue to be exploited because of their preparedness to care for people even if it means they work unpaid overtime, are subjected to appalling injuries and suffer the worst of days everyday.

To the Queensland Nurses Union and its members and aged care nurses across this state: my heart goes out to you. As a witness in the case for two and a half days, facing the barrage of five opposing barristers, I say to you that I would do it all again—and more—if I thought it would help your quality of working life. To the courageous nurses who stood and testified in the case, I salute you. To the Queensland Nurses Union and Gaye Hawksworth, I say to you: never give up, never give in; the nurses of Queensland need you too much.