



Speech by

CHRISTINE SMITH

MEMBER FOR BURLEIGH

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AMBULANCE SERVICE SUBSCRIPTIONS, PRIVATE HEALTH FUNDS

Mrs SMITH (Burleigh—ALP) (6.40 p.m.) Opposition members have tried to paint this as a privatisation of the Queensland Ambulance Service. Nothing could be further from the truth. The minister has made it clear that ambulance service delivery will continue to be provided by the Queensland public sector. Let us clear up the opposition's confusion on the issue once and for all. Should the ambulance subscription scheme go to private health insurance? The possible move away from the QAS subscription scheme is being examined solely because money from subscribers totals \$54 million and the cost of providing services to subscribers is \$68 million—a \$14 million loss. Since the Beattie government came to office, the QAS budget has grown from \$150 million to almost \$250 million in this financial year. This is a reflection of this government's commitment to a properly funded Ambulance Service. Once again, I echo the minister's oft-stated words that we have the best ambulance service available in Australia.

The government stated at the beginning of this process—and I reiterate—that it will only accept an arrangement with private health funds that guarantees the continuation of all existing benefits currently held by a QAS subscriber. In other words, apart from the fact that the subscription fund would be administered by private health funds, all coverage and benefits would be equivalent to what is currently enjoyed by people subscribing to the ambulance subscription scheme. All members of this House well know that Labor governments have spent record amounts to make the Queensland Ambulance Service what it is today: a high-quality service of which all Queenslanders can be proud.

The Queensland Ambulance Service has come a long way in the past decade or so. In 1990-91 there was bipartisan support in this House for the change of the old structure of separate independent ambulance committees to one statewide Ambulance Service. It is no exaggeration to say that there has been a total transformation in the Ambulance Service in that time. The standard of pre-hospital emergency care delivered by ambulance paramedics has advanced dramatically. Back then, ambulance officers were primarily first-aid officers providing a transport service. Throughout the 1990s, and particularly with the support of the Goss and Beattie Labor governments, the education standards of ambulance paramedics underwent a quantum leap. I take this opportunity to congratulate my nephew, Mathew Anderson, a QAS officer on the Gold Coast, for recently obtaining his intensive care paramedic qualifications. I know how hard he worked and studied for this achievement.

Today, the QAS provides leading edge, world-class pre-hospital emergency care and specialised transport services. Because of this, people now have a greater chance of survival than ever before. Our QAS paramedics are highly trained, better equipped and supported by a more aware community because of the numerous QAS public education and injury prevention programs. These education programs mean that approximately 60,000 Queenslanders receive first aid instruction from the QAS each year. In the last 11 years there has been an enormous investment in new and refurbished ambulance stations throughout Queensland, hundreds of new state-of-the-art ambulance vehicles and the installation of defibrillators in all first response ambulance vehicles.

The progress made by the Ambulance Service under this government is clearly demonstrated by the very high patient satisfaction rating which the QAS receives every year. The satisfaction rating stands at an extraordinary 95 per cent. This is an enormous vote of confidence in the services provided by ambulance officers throughout Queensland. Another wonderful outcome of this transformation of the Ambulance Service has been the improvements in the survival rate of cardiac arrest patients. Since 1995 there has been a doubling of the number of people surviving out-of-hospital cardiac arrest. This is a wonderful outcome for the increased investments made by the government in our Ambulance Service.

In conclusion, all these initiatives have been recognised at the national level on not one but two occasions through the Australian Business Excellence awards. At a ceremony in Sydney earlier this year, the QAS was recognised and rewarded for the second time for continuous improvement across a range of business excellence practices. This means that the QAS is renowned for its standard of service delivery. This is a world-class Ambulance Service, and this proposal is aimed at maintaining this very high quality of service to which all Queenslanders are entitled. To do this we need to ensure that our Ambulance Service funding is soundly based, and this proposal seeks to achieve that purpose.