



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

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STAFFING, HEALTH SERVICES

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (12.20 p.m.): I was intrigued to hear of Health Minister Wendy Edmond's offer of a free flight home for expat doctors, dentists, radiation therapists, pharmacists and of course nurses, even though, according to Queensland Health, there is not a nursing shortage. The minister has provided \$50,000 towards this plan. Without appearing too cynical, a mere \$50,000 seems pretty measly for a program designed to attract more medical professionals considering the extent of the Queensland Health crisis. I raise this point for the minister and hope that she takes it on board. This may come as a bit of a shock to her, but it is time she realised that the problems Queensland has in attracting nurses and doctors has absolutely nothing to do with the expense of an air fare.

Can members imagine it? Let us take, say, Flo Nightingale from Brisbane who is currently working as a nurse in London. She has applied for a two-year working visa and still has a year left. Somehow she hears about the offer for a free flight home and she thinks, 'Well, I have a choice. I can remain here for another year and earn at least double what I would if I returned to Australia, or I could go back home and work twice as hard for Wendy Edmond in an understaffed hospital for half the pay. Mmm, that's a hard choice!' In fact, this fly-home-free campaign is about as misguided as giving teachers \$50,000 to leave the profession when there is a teacher shortage. I hate to tell the minister, but nurses are not going to come home just because they can come home free; they will come home when their working visa is up.

The fundamental issue that the Beattie government fails to realise is that nurses are concerned about pay and working conditions in Queensland public hospitals. If those issues were addressed by the Beattie government, then perhaps there would not be a chronic staff shortage in public hospitals. As revealed in the budget estimates recently, the Beattie government is forking out \$15 million for agency nurses to cover the shortfall. In the long run, the government would be better off providing a better deal for nurses. I realise that the past four years of financial mismanagement have left the Beattie government strapped for cash, but let us face it: the health crisis did not just occur suddenly. There were warning signs and, frankly, more money should have been put aside in the last few budgets for not only nurses but also hospitals.

I turn now to the issue of doctors, and I will use my remaining time to tell the minister why this fly-home-free campaign will fail to attract sufficient doctors and specialists to fix the crisis. Again, doctors and specialists are not suddenly going to be persuaded home just because of a free flight home. I am sure that that is the least of their problems. Minister, the issue is medical indemnity cover. I know that she has trouble grasping the concept of there being a problem with the medical indemnity cover provided by Queensland Health, but I can assure her that fixing that problem would be a real step towards addressing the doctor shortage in the public system. I say it again: doctors and health professionals should be covered by Queensland Health unless proven criminally negligent in a court of law. That is what they want, and I am sure that implementing that would not even cost \$50,000. But let us face it: that \$50,000 was just a token gesture anyway. But it will not wash with the Queensland people, because they know that the problems within the health system go beyond the cost of air travel.

We are seeing a situation in hospitals throughout Queensland where existing doctors and specialists and other health professionals are withdrawing their services because of the failure of this Health Minister to address the lack of adequate medical indemnity cover in the public system. This is easily fixed, yet it is a disgrace that maternity wards have closed in regional Queensland, that a number of hospitals have withdrawn all of their gynaecological services, that people have to wait years to get even an eye appointment, and that mothers have to travel hours to get to a place where they can deliver their baby when the local hospital provided that service in the last 12 months. Things are at a critical point. These services are being lost while the Health Minister does nothing to address a fundamental issue which is totally within her hands to address.