



Speech by

ELISA ROBERTS

MEMBER FOR GYMPIE

Hansard 11 November 2003

GYMPIE PUBLIC HOSPITAL, PRIVACY LAWS

Miss ELISA ROBERTS (Gympie—Ind) (12.01 p.m.): During the last session of parliament I asked a question of the Minister for Health regarding the recent implementation of strict privacy laws within the Gympie public hospital. In her answer the minister stated that these laws have been in place for over 40 years. Well, they may have been in place in the rest of Queensland but they certainly were not in place in Gympie 40 years ago, nor were they in place 16 months ago when my father was a patient at the hospital for a considerable length of time.

Last week my electorate officer, Tracey, suffered a severe epileptic fit and subsequently became unconscious in front of her husband and me. An ambulance was called and both of us were advised that they would be taking Tracey to the Gympie Hospital. Soon after I arrived at the hospital. I was immediately taken in to see Tracey. After spending approximately ten minutes with her I left to go to my office, thinking that she would be released in a few hours.

However, a few hours later Tracey's husband rang me to tell me that she had just had another fit and that he was heading back to the hospital. I told him I would pop in as soon as I could get away. When I arrived at the hospital I went to the same unit that I had visited earlier that day and asked if I could see Tracey. I was advised that due to privacy laws the staff were unable to advise me whether or not Tracey was even at the hospital, let alone what ward or room she was in. I then went on to explain that I had already visited her this morning and that I had been with her when she had had the first attack and had been advised by the ambulance officers that she would be taken to Gympie Hospital. I also informed the staff that Tracey's husband had just rung me informing me that she had had another fit.

The staff then suggested I phone my electorate officer's husband. I told them that that was not possible as he was in the room with Tracey in the hospital and that he had his mobile phone switched off, as is the rule in most hospitals. By this stage I was becoming frustrated by the comedy of errors which was taking place.

I rang the Minister for Health's office from my mobile from the foyer of the hospital. The minister's staff could not believe how ridiculous the situation had become and said they would do what they could and ring me back.

Mrs Edmond: They said you were absolutely rude and abusive.

Miss ELISA ROBERTS: Rubbish. They think you are a fool. As a result the administrator and another staff member came downstairs to meet me and explain the new privacy laws and how there were some teething problems with their implementation. I must say they were at pains to try to explain the process. Apparently all patients are provided with a form which they are to fill out, advising who they will and will not see. It turns out that in the half a dozen hours since Tracey had been in the hospital neither she nor her husband had been provided with such a form.

I wonder how many people are put through what I was put through because the staff are too busy doing their jobs of attending to the sick to muck around with privacy forms. I bet there have been no new staff employed in order to run around getting these visitor forms filled out. Our hospitals are understaffed as it is and now staff are given additional duties to carry out. Now people are not able to visit their friends or relatives because of a piece of paper which may or may not have been filled out.

One wonders would happen if a patient, on admission, was too distraught or sick or worried to think of every possible person whom they wished to visit them. Another aspect of these ridiculous new procedures means that reception staff cannot even ring a particular patient to see if that person will allow a visitor to see them because the reception staff are not allowed to say that the patient is even in the hospital. Obviously they cannot ring the patient to see if they had inadvertently left the visitor's name off the secret piece of paper.

Many people can be forgiven for thinking that I am describing the latest Monty Python film. That is how ridiculous this all sounds. I understand the need for privacy in instances where someone is afraid of another person, for example, if a woman is beaten by her husband. If she advises the staff that she does not want him to be anywhere near her, then that is understandable. But to regard every single person as a threat or as someone with ulterior and devious motives is beyond comprehension.

As I previously stated, when my late father was a patient—

Mrs Edmond interjected.

Miss ELISA ROBERTS: Oh, just listen. When my late father was a patient at the hospital, people came and went at all times of the day. No questions were ever asked of me, my mother or my father. There were no forms, no queries. Over the last three years I have also visited a number of constituents in the hospital and I have never seen or heard of visiting forms or privacy issues until they were raised with me a few weeks ago by a local florist. Therefore the minister's reference to the laws being in for 40 years is slightly out by around 39 years. This nonsensical so-called privacy crackdown is nothing but an ill-thought out, badly implemented and administrative nightmare.

Mrs EDMOND: A rise to a point of order, Mr Speaker. The member is misrepresenting to the parliament. There has been patient privacy for as long as I have been working in the health system, which is nearly 40 years. The new federal privacy laws have brought in changes.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr McNamara): Order! There is no point of order.

Miss ELISA ROBERTS: This is a perfect example of Big Brother at its absolute worst. To restrict people who are at their most vulnerable from the pleasure of the company of family and friends is nothing short of cold heartedness and is an administrative nightmare to staff whose primary role is to help the sick.