



Speech by

HOWARD HOBBS

MEMBER FOR WARREGO

Hansard 15 October 2003

HEALTH LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr HOBBS (Warrego—NPA) (5.23 p.m.): I am pleased to be able to speak to the Health Legislation Amendment Bill. The bill before the House makes changes to a number of pieces of legislation. I understand that the reason for the changes was a national competition policy review that looked at the anticompetitive conditions in those acts and came up with some changes. An example is ensuring that practitioners uphold professional standards. They always have, but it is a matter of putting systems in place to ensure that remains the case. Also, applicants for registration must hold appropriate qualifications and must be fit to practise.

Only a registered medical practitioner may use the title 'medical practitioner'. Similar restrictions apply in relation to each of the 13 health practitioner registration acts so that, for example, only a registered physiotherapist may use the title 'physiotherapist' and only a registered dental technician may use the title 'dental technician'. I understand that there has been a fair bit of debate in relation to the use of the title 'Dr', although that is not dealt with in this bill. For instance, since 1979 chiropractors have been able to use the title 'Dr' provided that it is clearly mentioned that they are a doctor of chiropractic. I believe that dentists are in a similar situation. I do not think we need to change that system. It seems as if it is working okay. I know that there is a bit of a dispute going on, but I think one complaint in 20-odd years is not too bad.

Spinal manipulation is to be restricted to registered chiropractors, medical practitioners, osteopaths and physiotherapists. The amendments in this bill will ensure that only registered professionals with the necessary training and qualifications will be able to lawfully engage in spinal manipulation. As a person who uses chiropractors, I agree with that amendment. At different times we have all heard stories about people who have developed serious problems after being treated by people, maybe in good faith, but who are just not as good as others.

I wish to raise a number of issues in relation to health in general. Certainly in my electorate of Warrego there are a lot of wonderful people doing their best to provide a good health service. In recent years that service has been excellent. Regrettably, I must advise the House that that excellent service is deteriorating. I am not being political with this; that is just the way it is. The system is letting us down. Those people are trying very hard, but it just seems as though the system is starting to fail us. It is my responsibility to advise this House that that is happening.

As many would be aware, doctors are under pressure, especially specialist doctors who are living out in towns such as Roma. Roma is a major centre that operates a lot of specialist services. Aircraft are used to commute to the various towns and areas. There is a lot of pressure there all the time. It is very hard for specialists in those towns to find locums and, when they do, they are very expensive. The doctors are under a lot of pressure.

Tara in my electorate normally has three doctors. For over 12 months now we have had one doctor doing all of that work. The poor guy has just been worked to the bone. It is just not fair on him. I know that Queensland Health has tried its best in this instance to help with that; however, I still think we have to do more. We just cannot let a community's health service deteriorate like that. We are quite lucky that there were enough private doctors in the past to provide that service. But if private doctors cannot provide that service on a continuing basis, a second medical officer in that particular hospital will be needed. I believe that a second doctor is coming soon. That may help a little, but there is still a lot of pressure on those doctors out there. They are working very hard to provide a service.

Waiting lists are blowing out more than what we have had in the past. We have always had a short waiting list and we have been very fortunate that in a lot of rural towns and communities people have been able to get in to see a doctor. It is now getting much harder. I have had people ringing up saying that they cannot get in to see a doctor. It is disappointing that this is happening.

Dentist services are very thin on the ground, again with a waitlist. Unfortunately, I have to report that, quite frankly, the patient travel scheme is really off the rails. It is just not working the way it did. It was a very successful scheme. I have a recent example when a constituent of mine went to see a private doctor and got a referral to a specialist in Toowoomba. That private doctor signed off on the patient travel form. The constituent then went to the hospital to get that signed off by the medical superintendent and had to wait for an appointment to see a doctor. We had two doctors seeing the one patient for a travel form. Surely there is a travel officer or someone who can just sign the damn thing off! Why are we blocking up a system with bureaucracy when there is no need to? If the private doctor cannot fill out a form, it would be a bit surprising to me. If there is a problem for some reason, surely they can sort it out. The guidelines are there. I do not see why a patient had to go and see two doctors simply because the system failed and they would not sign off on a travel form. That is one example.

There is a very interesting situation that has happened in St George—another area in my electorate—where a number of positions have not been filled for quite a long time. People out there understand that professional people cannot always be found and that these jobs are hard to fill. But when it drags on and when there are quite a lot of positions that have not been filled, it gets pretty serious. For instance, in St George we have either lost or not had an adolescent mental health worker since March 2002, an adult mental health worker since May 2003, a social worker since December 2002, a medical health promotion officer and an occupational therapist. They are basic services that should be able to be provided to the community and we have not filled those positions. The system is grinding to a halt. At the moment, people who should normally be able to have a reasonable service are not being provided with that service by the government.

There is a proposal in Cunnamulla to centralise the laundry service. An audit is being done in the far west at present to see if they can combine the Augathella, Morven, Quilpie, Cunnamulla and Thargomindah laundry services and have one laundry service. Here we go again. We lose jobs in those towns. What are people going to do in the case of flooding when the truck or whatever it is cannot get out? Are people going to try, on a daily basis, to get laundry going either way to a central area—Charleville or somewhere? I do not know why we have to put ourselves through all this agony.

I believe that Cunnamulla has just completed a refurbishment of their laundry. It might not be as good as it could be, but certainly if a bit more money was put into it it would probably get it going and it would be pretty good. The reality is that if we just keep on taking away those services, it winds back the whole system. It is just not satisfactory. I would certainly like to see some funding put into those laundry services and those jobs kept in those towns. We would then be able to concentrate on the major issues rather than to keep on defending ourselves all the time—trying to defend jobs and trying to keep the services in those communities.

Another issue that I wanted to mention was the Medical Aid Subsidy Scheme. I wrote a letter to the minister about this. It was about representations from Jodie Smith who had a reclining bath chair, shoulder harness and headrest extension on order for her son Jake since 10 September through the Medical Aid Subsidy Scheme. She was advised on 25 August 2003 that, due to demands on the scheme, there is currently an indefinite waiting list for aids and that she should consider making alternative arrangements in the relation to the supply of equipment. Jake's physiotherapists—

...recommended that he be supplied with accessories for his Convaid Cruiser to assist in maintaining posture and safety. The bath chair is a necessary aid to safely support Jake, who at the age of seven, is difficult to support in the bath by his mother.

I would appreciate it if there is something that the minister can do for Jake to see whether she could hurry things along there, because his mum is certainly in a bit of trouble. I would appreciate whatever assistance the minister could provide.

There are a number of other issues in this legislation that could be discussed. It contains a number of changes to many acts. Generally speaking, I think that there are going to be some improvements out of it. I commend the bill to the House.