



Speech by

KAREN STRUTHERS

MEMBER FOR ALGESTER

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HEALTH LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Ms STRUTHERS (Algeester—ALP) (4.22 p.m.): One of the first actions of the mean-spirited Howard government in 1996 was to cause a gaping hole in dental care in Australia. That was by removing \$100 million from the federal dental assistance program and scrapping that program altogether. It is pleasing to see that the Minister for Health, Wendy Edmond, has been determined in her efforts to improve accessibility to dental care in Queensland and to improve the affordability of dental care.

The minister has done a couple of things in this bill that I think will be quite significant in their impact on making dental care in Queensland more affordable and accessible. She has certainly done a lot to increase funding and inject more funding into public dental health clinics in Queensland. In this bill she has taken steps to remove some of the restrictive practices in our dental health system. She has also made sure that there is due recognition of dental therapists and oral health therapists. That will go a long way to making dental care more accessible for people. The bill duly recognises dental auxiliaries within the scope of the Dental Practitioners Registration Act. Dental auxiliaries will now also be appointed to and have a say on the Dental Board. The restrictions that have limited dental therapists to employment in the public sector have been removed.

I have worked actively to support efforts to improve accessibility to and the affordability of dental health care. In a former life at QCOSS I worked on the Bite Back campaign—a national campaign to try to restore the federal dental assistance program. Over the past few years in Queensland I have worked alongside the Dental Therapists Association and the very committed women particularly in that association who have been trying to remove those restrictive practices so that they, too, can practise on adults and in the private sector, not just on children in the public sector. They had a very successful It's Crunch Time campaign.

I commend the efforts of those dedicated workers in achieving what they have achieved, and I acknowledge the support the minister and Queensland Health staff have provided to their efforts. They had to take on the dentists. I think it is fair to say that the dentists have been very nervous about threats to their practice base—I suppose we in professions all would be—but I want to reassure people in this House that, certainly from the information I have received from them, dental therapists know the limits of their skills. They know the limits of their practice base, but they also know that they are well trained and have been providing outstanding care in Queensland, as have dentists.

We have a great dental health system; it is just not always affordable for people. The dental therapists know their limits. They are not trying to do something that will make the sky fall in. They simply want to be duly recognised for the training that they have done. It is university training. I want to reassure some of the members in the House today. I think the members for Tablelands and Maroochydore had some reservations about the removal of these restrictive practices. These oral health therapists will be able to perform a lot more support work to dentists under the supervision of dentists. That is the important qualifier, I guess: it will be under the supervision of dentists. They are not trying to operate separate from dentists.

Dental therapists and oral health therapists have been performing a lot of good work on kids. They have been drilling, filling, extracting, cleaning and doing all of those horrible things we hate having done to us. They have been doing all of that on children's teeth primarily. They have worked on some adults but primarily on children. I do not know the difference between filling the tooth of a 15-year-old

boy and filling the tooth of a 21-year-old adult woman. It has been an unnecessary restrictive practice. I see a future whereby dental therapists will be able, under the supervision of dentists, to be out in the regional areas more than they are now, working to provide more care than is available now. I certainly see the removal of these restrictive practices as a very positive aspect of this bill. I commend the minister for the efforts she has made to bring this about.

Dental care is out of the reach of many low-income people. The Queensland government has taken very positive steps in my own local area. The QE II public health clinic received an allocation of over \$400,000 recently, which will be used to provide 1,659 additional visits. I am not sure how those calculations are made, but I trust that means that a lot more people will be getting a lot more care in my area.

Probably at least weekly I hear from people who are having trouble getting into the clinic locally. So that represents good news for local families—local families in suburbs like Acacia Ridge. Thirty per cent of the people in my local area of Acacia Ridge earn less than \$200 a week. Imagine if they went to the dentist twice in a few months. Their \$200 would be gone very quickly. That is the sort of reality we are facing here. People cannot afford the private dental system, cannot always afford private health insurance and cannot wait on waiting lists for public dental health clinics. It is important that we continue to support our public dental health clinics. It is certainly important that we continue to bite back against the federal government's savage cuts to and removal of a very important Labor initiative, that is, the federal dental assistance scheme.

I want to assure local residents in my area that I will be snapping at the heels of the federal members around me. Gary Hardgrave does very little other than bleat. We never see any action out of him. One issue I ask him to take up with his federal colleagues is the reinstatement of the federal dental assistance scheme prior to the next election.

Mrs Edmond: Every state government in Australia, even when they were not Labor, called for that. Before the change in government in the other states, every state—Liberal, National and Labor—called for the reinstatement of that.

Ms STRUTHERS: Yes, and a federal Labor government is committed to reinstating the federal dental assistance scheme. I will certainly be keen to make sure the Liberal colleagues around me do their bit to bite at the heels of their mean-spirited Prime Minister, who does not seem to understand that people in suburbs like Acacia Ridge on less than \$200 a week cannot afford private dental care.

I urge dentists to embrace the opportunity provided through this bill to work alongside dental and oral therapists in the private system and to work more widely with adults. This is an opportunity for them, not a threat. It is not a threat to their practice or their standards of practice. I urge them to get behind these changes and really work well with the dental therapists to develop a good, comprehensive code of practice that can instil public confidence in the system and reduce any of these unnecessary concerns about these pseudodental practitioners getting more and broader work or a broader practice base. These are certainly very positive changes and I commend all of those who have been involved in the development of this legislation.