



Speech by

**LINDY NELSON-CARR**

**MEMBER FOR MUNDINGBURRA**

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#### **TOWNSVILLE HOSPITAL**

**Ms NELSON-CARR** (Mundingburra—ALP) (11.58 a.m.): Last week in Townsville we had another busy week in the headlines with the Rugby World Cup. We also had a very timely visit from the Premier and the Minister for Health, Wendy Edmond. At a time when federally health care is in crisis, we in Queensland continue to make positive announcements, ensuring Queenslanders continue to get the best public health services in Queensland. Not only did the Beattie government support Ronald McDonald House to provide a home away from home for seriously ill children undergoing specialised treatment—it is the only one outside of Brisbane—but also Townsville Hospital patients needing urgent or semiurgent operations have a 95 per cent chance of receiving the procedure in the recommended time frame, that is, within 30 days. Of these patients needing semiurgent and category 2 operations, 96 out of every 100 people received them within the 90-day recommended period. I congratulate Townsville Hospital's excellent team of management personnel, as well as doctors and nurses, for providing world-class services.

But it gets better. Now all babies in north Queensland will have access to free hearing tests under a \$22 million child screening and treatment program—another announcement by the Premier, Peter Beattie. Townsville Hospital, along with the Royal Brisbane and Mater hospitals, will be a key tertiary hospital in this program. Free tests will begin in January 2004 at Townsville Hospital for the high-risk babies, and those babies include premmie babies and those with some family history of hearing problems.

The program will then be progressively rolled out to other centres so that from 2005-06 onwards the Queensland Health Hearing Program will be available to all of about 50,000 babies born in Queensland each year. Townsville Hospital will be equipped with the latest automated auditory brain stem response technology, which will measure the auditory system's response to sound. If hearing problems are detected early and treatment begins before babies are six months old, they have a stronger chance of heading off future communication, health and learning problems. About 300 Queensland babies each year are born with a serious hearing impairment, and this will make an invaluable difference to them and their families. The program will also produce significant benefits to the whole community in terms of future health and education costs.

Dr John Whitehall, who is the director of neonatology at Townsville Hospital and whom I have applauded in this House before, publicly congratulated our government for providing this critical service. He is responsible for the 500 sick babies treated in his unit each year, and he makes the point that, while hearing loss occurs in two to three per 1,000 of the general population, the numbers are 10 times greater in graduates from neonatal intensive care. Dr Whitehall deserves the highest praise, as do his dedicated and wonderful staff.

At this point I would like to congratulate Minister Edmond for supporting this concept as well as local Thuringowan Ron Costabeber, who has a personal interest in hearing screening and has been a staunch advocate. Quota International deserves its share of recognition as it has been extremely active in lobbying for the service as well. Congratulations to all. It is a pity the same cannot be said of the federal government, which says it does not have the money for fundamental social services. Vital services are in decline, bulk-billing is in free fall and out-of-pocket medical expenses are rising.

While the federal government continues to dud the states with the latest health care agreement, it is not surprising that when the minister and the Premier held a press conference in

Townsville last week the only negative attention given was to federal health matters. Let us examine this. Seven years of Howard's policies has meant goodbye to Medicare. His policies have eroded industrial conditions of Australians. Australians have no job security, and their ability to balance work and family is that much less. Tony Abbott's brave new world means that seven million concession card holders will not be guaranteed bulk-billing, and he will scrap plans to make doctors agree to bulk-bill all concession card holders, effectively making the new package worse than the one now before the Senate.

He is quoted as saying that forcing doctors to bulk-bill patients is a form of medical conscription. Instead, he wants these decisions to be made by doctors themselves on the basis of patient need. If UMP is any indication, I think we are in deep trouble. I can see an American two-tiered system coming on where only those patients willing to pay will be treated first. The Howard government is the highest taxing government in Australia's history. Australians are paying more now than ever before but getting less. Why is it that record tax dollars do not equate to decent services? In other words, if Australians want quality health care and education for their children, they will still have to fork out more. It is a shameful position and one which will become that much more difficult as our nation deals with the ageing population. Why with a surging economy will Howard not tackle the real social issues? It is almost criminal.