



Speech by

Lindy Nelson-Carr

MEMBER FOR MUNDINGBURRA

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MEDICAL STUDENTS

Ms NELSON-CARR (11.40 a.m.): Currently, the James Cook University School of Medicine, which has a strong emphasis on general practice and rural medicine, has around 400 students across the five-year course. The school came into being in 2001 and it will hold its first graduation at the end of 2005. Townsville is justifiably proud to be home to a school of medicine—Australia's first new medical school in 25 years. The school serves the greater north Queensland community and I welcome the ongoing support for it from the Beattie government.

Therefore, it is with concern that I draw attention to the high cost of university degrees, in particular medical degrees. Those high costs are due to come into force next year. Under legislation passed by the federal parliament last year, for the first time universities will be able to charge full fees to Australian medical students. Full-fee places are expected to generate \$350 million for universities over the next four years. For example, according to a report that appeared in the *Australian* on 1 July, the University of Melbourne could charge domestic students up to \$210,000 to obtain a medical degree.

If that figure is accurate, then the situation is much worse than anticipated. A little over a year earlier on 29 May the *Age* carried a story forecasting that, under the federal government's deregulated system, there will be up-front fees of \$150,000 for a medical degree at the University of Melbourne. At the time, that amount of \$150,000 was denied. So, too, was an earlier suggestion of \$135,000, the reason being given that that figure was deemed too much. The *Age* report stated—

Last week Dr Nelson rejected suggestions that a medical degree would cost as much as \$135,000.

The reporter quoted Dr Nelson as stating—

It wouldn't be fair to make students pay \$135,000 for a university medical degree.

Are we looking at hyper-inflation? In May 2003 we had a denial of a \$135,000 fee on the grounds that it was unfair. Then 14 months later we had the revelation that the University of Melbourne was looking to charge \$210,000. If \$130,000 was regarded as unfair, what word best describes \$210,000? This group wants us to believe in it and to trust it. That is only one university. Once the cash registers start ticking over, how many others will follow suit? If James Cook University chooses to charge fees that even remotely approach the level of those mooted by the University of Melbourne, the chances of hundreds of young north Queenslanders seeking medical careers may well be dashed to their own loss and to the loss of the region as a whole.

Many students who miss out on HECS places and who are intent on becoming doctors or who are looking to other careers, which also come with a big price tag, will have to put themselves very heavily in debt to meet the up-front full fees. The alternative for those students is to just walk away from their dreams. Even capped government loans of \$50,000 would not come close to meeting the cost of a degree. The high cost of becoming a doctor would mean that gifted students could miss out through a lack of financial resources while others with perhaps lesser prospects but who are cashed up, would make the grade. I also make the point that under the federal coalition HECS fees are destined to increase by up to 25 per cent. That is another heavy impost on young people and their families, particularly when there are good savings to be made for those who can afford to pay off a HECS debt early.

The JCU School of Medicine vision statement is to pursue excellence and to provide leadership in medical education and research. In particular, programs will be responsive to the health needs of the communities of northern Australia and the school will be a leader in the focus areas of rural and remote health, indigenous health and tropical medicine for Australia and the wider Asia-Pacific region. That is a commendable vision and one that is being realised. However, the potential impost of exorbitant up-front fees may well mean that continuing to achieve the vision would become a whole lot harder, if not well nigh impossible, in the years ahead.

Children should be given every opportunity to reach their full potential in life, and that includes being able to attend the university course of their choice if they have the will and the ability, even if they do not have the cash. Up-front fees prevent many children from lower-income families from attending university to become a doctor, lawyer or whatever. It is not only unfair; it is un-Australian.