



Speech by

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COMMUNITY AMBULANCE COVER AMENDMENT BILL

Mr KNUTH (Charters Towers—NPA) (4.53 p.m.): I support the Community Ambulance Cover Amendment Bill. I do recognise that the government is working on a range of exemptions. However, there is much more to be done to ensure that ambulance cover is fair. Many people perceive this to be a grossly unfair tax and an unfair system of gathering revenue. It is unfair because it discriminates against Queenslanders who pay this tax over and over again. People who have a fishing hut which is used once or twice a year still pay two full ambulance levies. People who have power to their shed in their backyards on separate meters have to pay two levies. Miners who work away from home who live in rented accommodation and then drive home for their days off pay two ambulance levies. I know people who own their own business and homes in Charters Towers who have recently purchased a home on the coast so they can retire. They currently pay three ambulance levies.

Some smaller towns do not have a full-time ambulance officer in attendance. Greenvale, which is 200 kilometres from the nearest medical service, has an ambulance but no ambulance officer, nor does it have a driver. People in some of the smaller regional towns do not have a full-time ambulance officer in attendance—for example, Greenvale. Another disappointing factor for these people who pay the ambulance levy in this township is that they are unable to drive that ambulance during emergencies as there are no public servants and laws prohibit locals who are not public servants or ambulance staff from driving that vehicle. Legislation should be changed so that members of these rural communities could do defensive driving courses so that these people can have the ability to use the ambulance vehicle during emergencies.

It is also ridiculous that Richmond has been left without a dedicated ambulance officer. Hospital staff at Richmond have to drive and operate the town's ambulance vehicle because the government is too miserable to provide the people of the town and the district with a dedicated ambulance officer. Hospital staff are doing a great job in ensuring that residents have access to ambulance services. However, unfortunately the hospital staff are virtually on call 24 hours a day which puts pressure on staff and patients. Georgetown is another town in the same situation as Richmond. Hospital staff travel hundreds of kilometres to assist accident victims. Jericho is another town without the services of a full-time ambulance officer.

In parliament recently the Minister for Emergency Services told the residents of Jericho that they did not deserve a full-time ambulance officer because they were too careful. Their rate of incident was only one per month, and this, according to the minister, does not warrant a full-time ambulance officer. The minister may be aware that there have been a number of incidents where people in the Jericho region have been in life-threatening situations because of no ambulance services. Does this mean that they do not need to pay the full ambulance levy? We all know how valuable an ambulance service is to our rural communities, and it is ridiculous that these towns do not have an ambulance officer. The residents of these townships pay the full ambulance levy yet only receive minimum service. If the government wants to charge top dollar for services, it needs to be very sure that each and every person receives a fair go and has equal access to these services.

The Premier stated in a media release on 18 February 2003 that 412 families that previously paid \$98 per year under a subscription scheme would save significantly under an ambulance levy. With this latest increase in the levy there is now only a difference of \$7.80 between the two fees. Many families are paying more than once and many rural communities are not receiving appropriate services like the metropolitan areas are. The idea that this scheme is more affordable for families is now looking very weak. Under the old scheme, single subscriptions previously paid an estimated \$76 a year.

Mr Cummins interjected.

Mr KNUTH: The minister should go and talk to the people of Jericho and ask them some of the life-threatening situations that they have been in.

Mr Cummins interjected.

Mr KNUTH: He should go to Jericho and Richmond. They are paying the ambulance tax. He is imposing this ambulance tax three or four times on these people, is he not? Isn't that enough?

In the past there was a subscription service. If a person subscribed, they in turn received the services of the ambulance free of charge. If they did not subscribe, they paid. Unless the government can ensure the smaller towns in rural and remote Queensland access to 24-hour ambulance services, it has no right to charge people three or four times over, nor does it have the right to inflict an increase on these people. I do recognise that the government is working on a range of exemptions. However, there is much more to be done to ensure that ambulance cover is fair. I commend the bill to the House.