



Speech by

Michael Choi

MEMBER FOR CAPALABA

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MEDICAL PRACTITIONERS REGISTRATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr CHOI (Capalaba—ALP) (6.14 pm): I rise to give my support to the Medical Practitioners Registration Amendment Bill 2006. At the outset can I refer to some of the comments made by the honourable member for Callide. In his contribution he basically blamed the state government for every single thing that has gone wrong in the health system in Queensland and, for that matter, in Australia. Can I remind the honourable member for Callide that doctors are given permission to practice in Queensland not by the Premier, not by the Minister for Health, not by this government, not by the ALP and not by any member of this parliament but by the Medical Board of Queensland.

It is unfair and dishonest to come in here and argue that somehow this state government is to be blamed for every single thing that has gone wrong in health. I think it is also unfair to suggest that the Beattie Labor government has done nothing to address health issues in our state. We are debating this legislation for the very reason that the Beattie Labor government is doing something to address some of the issues and concerns we have in Queensland Health.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. This bill clearly reflects this government's continued commitment towards recognising and addressing health issues that are of vital importance to the people of Queensland. The lengthy time frame and the less than perfect occasions associated with processing applications for the registration of doctors has been a hot topic since last year. This bill addresses and rectifies some of those issues. This bill also allows for more efficient practices with regard to some minor operational difficulties that were identified by the Medical Board of Queensland.

Effectively this bill amends the Medical Practitioners Registration Act 2003 in three ways: streamlining the registration of international medical graduates, expediting the registration processes and addressing minor operational problems currently experienced with the act. In a nutshell this bill will fast-track the registration of doctors without compromising or relaxing any professional and medical standards and without causing an increase in risk to personal safety.

I am sure we are all aware of the issue surrounding the shortfall in doctors currently being experienced Australia-wide. This bill is obviously another measure to rectify a situation where the Commonwealth government has failed in its responsibilities. It is a fact identified by the Queensland health minister that our state was among the hardest hit by the Commonwealth's failure to provide adequate funding for our universities which has forced us to compete with other states and, in fact, other countries around the globe for doctors and to poach many from overseas. As the health minister has commented, we need leadership from the Howard government on health.

Nationally speaking, registration for overseas trained doctors is obtained through the Australian Medical Council. It is a fact that many overseas doctors apply to become doctors in Australia. It is very competitive and many do not obtain their registration.

The Medical Board of Queensland is the organisation responsible for the registration of medical practitioners in Queensland. Before a person in Queensland can practise they must first register with the board. The board is the statutory authority established to enact the provisions of the Medical Practitioners Registration Act 2001 and, consequently, the amendments outlined in the bill.

There is no denying that the state government is playing a crucial role in helping to deal with the national doctor shortage when the Premier announced earlier this month that 35 additional students will start their medical training at Griffith University's Southport campus. These 35 students are the first intake of new state government funded medical students. These students will train in Queensland and work in Queensland, and the Premier commented that these are our doctors of tomorrow. In October 2005 this state government provided the Queensland health system with the biggest single injection of health funding in the state's history—a \$6.367 billion package to be delivered in just over five years of which \$4.431 billion is totally new money.

This massive funding combined with a complete overhaul of the health system will mean better hospitals and better health care for all Queensland families. It will provide new and better services, with around 1,200 additional doctors and nurses statewide. It would be remiss of me if I did not throughout the course of my contribution pay tribute and respect to the many hardworking doctors and nurses, whether they are trained locally or overseas, who are currently functioning and working within our public health system. They should be assured that we recognise their dedication, their professionalism and the important role they play in maintaining a healthy community.

It was always obvious that there were insufficient doctors at a national level. Doctor training is not usually a state government responsibility, but we have been left with no choice. We need urgent and immediate action. The Queensland state government is working on a number of initiatives to help solve the national doctor shortage. In the past eight months Queensland Health has employed an additional 190 doctors. In addition, since January 109 new doctors from interstate and overseas have been registered by the Medical Board of Queensland in our hospitals. It has become a matter of urgency that the Commonwealth government should come to the party and train more local doctors. I do not understand why the Howard government simply refuses to contribute significantly to resolve the doctor shortage problem.

I was in a shopping centre not too long ago when a young man walked up to me and asked if I was his local member. I said, 'If you live in my electorate I am.' He said that he was an OP1 student and always wanted to do medicine. I asked, 'Did you do medicine?' He said, 'No, I can't afford it, Michael,' because to do medicine he has to spend over \$100,000 in the next four or five years in order to graduate as a doctor. He told me that he did not want to start his family or his professional life owing somebody, whether it was the government or the bank, over \$100,000. This is a problem. There are many very smart, very dedicated and very able Australian students. They are Australians; they are Queenslanders. They want to do medicine, but because of the federal government's lack of funding for our universities they cannot afford to do so. That is why we have to import doctors.

I have a moral concern with importing doctors from countries such as India, because that country spends a lot of money training its doctors and when they qualify they go overseas. I really have serious concerns with that because I think that the citizens of India will probably need those doctors far more than we do. We should be training doctors so we can export our Australian doctors to help those Third World countries, not import them because the federal government has failed in its duty to fund universities properly. I conclude with those few words and commend the bill to the House.