



Speech by

Robert Messenger

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard Wednesday, 11 October 2006

BURNETT ELECTORATE, MENTAL HEALTH CARE

Mr MESSENGER (Burnett—NPA) (9.10 pm): I am pleased that the member for Nudgee raised the issue of mental health. The need for proper mental health care is obvious these days. Without proper mental health care, lives are placed unnecessarily at risk. Families are put under tremendous pressure trying to care for loved ones who are mentally ill, and sometimes that pressure becomes so great that it rips those families apart. Relationships are destroyed and the physical and mental health of the carers is often ruined. So it is imperative that a basic level of mental health care is provided to all communities.

Unfortunately for the residents of Bundaberg and Burnett, that basic level of mental health care is missing. It has been missing since the health minister, the Hon. Stephen Robertson, in one of his first acts after he was sworn in in August 2005—just over a year ago—closed the mental health in-patient facility at the Bundaberg Base Hospital. Sixteen in-patient beds were shut down without any community consultation. Sixteen in-patient beds were shut down without any consultation with staff.

This downgrading of the mental health service in the aftermath of one of this country's worst-ever health disasters and when there is the greatest need for in-patient care shows a heartlessness and callousness which is difficult to understand. Since that closure we have heard a variety of reasons why it has remained closed and promises of when it will open. All of those promises have been broken.

We have had the health minister and other Queensland Health bureaucrats telling us that the reason for our unit's closure was the unexpected resignation of a principal house officer and the difficulty in attracting other senior medical staff and specialists within the service. Our minds, however, were temporarily put at ease when we were assured that the unit would reopen once the clinical director, Dr Naeem Jhetam, arrived. After our community waited patiently, finally Dr Jhetam arrived this August. Two months on and the in-patient facility remains closed.

Last week I sought answers when I met with the acting district manager, Mr John Wylie. He informed me that the unit would not realistically be open until the end of this year and to expect that the facility most probably would be up and running in approximately six months time. The reason this time, I am told, is that the mental health unit is in need of renovation and will not achieve accreditation until those renovations are completed. This is the first time I have heard this excuse. It is a new one. The time for excuses is over. The time for action is at hand. The families of Bundaberg and the Burnett deserve a proper and fully functioning mental health in-patient facility.