



Speech by

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HEALTH QUALITY AND COMPLAINTS COMMISSION BILL

Ms LEE LONG (Tablelands—ONP) (9.06 pm): I rise to speak to the Health Quality and Complaints Commission Bill 2006. This bill is a major plank in the Beattie government's desperate efforts to repair the horrendous damage it has inflicted on the public hospital system in Queensland for the nearly two decades the ALP has been in government.

This bill has a simple objective: to provide for oversight and review of and improvement in the quality of health services and to also provide independent review and management of health complaints. Why is this bill before us? Because of the unjustifiable deaths in the Queensland public health system of people who should have lived because of the unforgivably long waiting list public hospital patients face; because of patients being forced to ramp up in ambulances unable to even get into emergency departments; and because of years of misery and pain inflicted by this government on the people of Queensland while ignoring each and every warning sign put before it. Time after time the various health ministers among those opposite stood up in this place and in response to concerns put before them told us all was well. They told us that the attacks were unjustified, that the existing systems were working well and that we had the best health systems in the universe—and on it went while Queenslanders were dying unnecessarily. Thank God for that one brave nurse.

Part of that system killing Queenslanders was the Health Rights Commission. It was one of a range of checks and balances and professional and review organisations that completely failed to work. Yet here it is being taken holus-bolus, staff and powers both, and being used as a basis for this new Health Quality and Complaints Commission. On what basis are we supposed to think it will be any more effective now? The argument will no doubt be that it has new powers and will have a new head in terms of a new commissioner and up to seven assistant commissioners. These new powers are a result of the recommendations of the Forster review. It is a pity that for years this government chose to ignore example after example of failures in Queensland Health in favour of cheap political point-scoring.

I make no apology for viewing this bill and this new body with a very cynical eye. The bill imposes a duty on all health service providers to establish, maintain and implement processes to improve the quality of services. Year after year, minister after minister, we were told these processes were already in place. This bill will introduce processes to monitor the quality of health services and protect the health and wellbeing of consumers—again something the ALP spent years vowing and declaring were already in place. It must have been pretty happy with the way things were being done pre Patel because here we have all the existing Health Rights Commission powers just transferred straight over with a bit of a tune-up for appearance's sake.

The explanatory notes tell us that this new commission will be able to make standards for how providers comply with their duties, including standards about safety and clinical effectiveness. My recollection is that one of the clearest messages from both the Bundaberg and the Forster reviews was the need for bureaucracy and administration to get out of the way of doctors when it came to clinical matters. However, we have yet another commission or authority or quango being empowered to stick its oar right back into that issue.

Another very clear message was that Queensland Health had an abysmal corporate culture of intimidation, ignoring complaints and punishing those who were brave enough to speak up. I would think that the searing experience of Patel, by itself, would have brought about a culture shift in Queensland Health. However, as has become clear, even post Patel, any medical professional within the public system who speaks up is still risking their career, as seen by the harsh treatment dealt out to Dr Chris Davis, the head of rehabilitation and aged care at the Prince Charles Hospital here in Brisbane. The minister has since apologised for how this doctor was treated. However, that does not change the fact that even post Patel, Queensland Health has not learnt and it has not changed. It seems that basically the same people and the same organisation will police it. This is the stuff of *Fawlty Towers*.

Let us look at who will run this new commission. The explanatory notes state that the commissioner and his assistants must, first of all, have experience at governance—not medicine, not allied health, not hospital management, but governance. So much for putting doctors back in the loop. In fact, all that is required medically is that at least one assistant has expertise in medicine, one in nursing and one in allied health. Three out of a possible eight. Amazing.

I note that the new body will be able to hold public inquiries into the quality of health services. I would hope that if it did this, its terms of reference would not be artificially limited.

I want to address another issue relating to complaints about health care in public hospitals—the desperate need for a one-stop shop. Someone who has had a bad experience wants their concerns addressed. They do not need to be told, ‘No, it is a matter for the AMA,’ or ‘No, it is a matter for the nurses’ registration board,’ or whatever. I have had constituents approach me who are as frustrated by their efforts to make their complaint as they are angry about the treatment they want to complain about.

I take this opportunity to make it clear that I believe that the vast majority of Queensland Health staff, both clinical and administrative, are dedicated and hard working. It is to the eternal shame of this government that its unwillingness, year after year, to do anything to fix the problems that existed has led to the present situation. I fervently hope that the new commission will make a difference. However, based on the Beattie government’s long track record of failure, I cannot shake the fear that my hope may be badly misplaced.