



Speech by

Rosemary Menkens

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

Hansard Wednesday, 24 May 2006

TOWNSVILLE HOSPITAL, ONCOLOGY SERVICES

Mrs MENKENS (Burdekin—NPA) (10.14 pm): I wish to bring to the attention of the House the appalling situation that still exists for cancer patients awaiting radiation treatment at the Townsville Hospital. The official Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists' own guidelines state that major treatments should commence within two weeks. Patients in Townsville are being forced to wait over four months for this life-saving treatment. This is totally unacceptable.

Ms Nelson-Carr: Rubbish.

Mrs MENKENS: It is not rubbish. During the last election campaign the Premier promised to install a new linear accelerator in Townsville. That commitment was made almost 2½ years ago and it is yet to be honoured. As a direct result of this failure figures have worsened. As at 16 May, unreleased but official figures showed that there were 20 category 2 patients waiting for up to 30 days for treatment and 159 category 3 patients waiting an interminable 127 days. All these patients have cancer and are technically all category 1.

The health department has known for 2½ years that to commission this third linear accelerator it is necessary to have an oncology information management system in place. This is the question that I asked the minister this morning and he read me a letter from today's *Townsville Bulletin* about the waiting list numbers. My question remains: where is the oncology information management system and when can the linear accelerator be commissioned? The people in the north are left to wait because of the callous and underhand spin generated by this government.

For the record, it would seem that those patients fortunate to live near Brisbane are spared much of this additional agony. Waiting times at Brisbane hospitals for this same treatment are one-third or lower than those in Townsville. Perhaps promises in Brisbane are worth more. The overdue accelerator for Townsville is expected to arrive in September, but that still leaves the matter of implementing the necessary oncology information management system and employing additional specialist staff.

The hospital needs physicists to run the machines. Under the new conditions, physicists have fared badly and are rightly rather hard to recruit. They and their services are integral to commissioning the linear accelerator and providing essential maintenance and repairs.

Radiation therapists' salaries are 30 per cent behind New South Wales which makes Queensland positions less attractive. Until and if this accelerator is brought on line, the absolutely magnificent staff at Townsville Hospital are being asked to work an extra shift to cope with the backlog. I applaud their dedication and compassion, but this is simply adding to their workload and is only a short-term solution.

It seems the minister has no answer to this ongoing problem. The question without notice this morning to the minister left him scratching for an answer and he had to resort to reading a letter from the *Townsville Bulletin* in reply. If the minister has to rely on the *Bulletin* for his information I will happily pay for a subscription if it helps him. Promises, promises—from this government they are worse than nothing.