



Speech by

**Barbara Stone**

**MEMBER FOR SPRINGWOOD**

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## **WORKERS' COMPENSATION AND REHABILITATION AND OTHER ACTS AMENDMENT BILL**

**Ms STONE** (Springwood—ALP) (3.10 pm): It is with pleasure that I rise to speak in support of the bill. Firstly, I acknowledge the speech just made by the member for Waterford. The honourable member gave a very detailed and knowledgeable speech. I thank him for that detail. More than that, he really found the heart of what workers compensation is about.

The bill will enable the introduction of a range of improved workers' benefits and rehabilitation initiatives. Rehabilitation and return-to-work strategies are integral to getting injured workers back into gainful employment and reducing the personal and economic impact of work injury.

A reduction in the duration of claims has been identified as a key means of cost reduction by facilitating the early return of injured workers to work using a range of rehabilitation initiatives. The removal of the step-downs in benefits at the 12-month and two-year milestones is a key initiative. This initiative will serve to provide more financial stability and certainty to more seriously injured workers, rather than impose further financial pressure during periods of extended rehabilitation which contribute to more durable return-to-work outcomes.

I will detail exactly what that means. The bill removes the step-down in benefits from 75 per cent to 60 per cent of Queensland ordinary time earnings for workers still incapacitated 12 months post injury. This means that the only reduction in benefits applying for longer term injured workers will be the present step-down after the first six months of incapacity. This change will provide injured workers with 75 per cent of their normal weekly earnings every week they are off work between 26 weeks and up to five years. Further enhancements lower the work related injury threshold from 50 per cent to 30 per cent for which severely injured workers can access additional lump sum payments and an increase in the lump sum total to a maximum of \$218,400. This means that more workers with life-changing injuries can readily access funds to make changes in their home and lifestyle necessary to meet their changed circumstances.

This is such an important point because many people do not realise that when a person has to take time off work due to an injury, there are a lot of associated and unexpected out-of-pocket expenses. Doctors' appointments, transport costs involved in trying to get to doctors' and hospital appointments, chemist costs and medical aid costs all add up. People are looking for that money up-front. They are trying to pay those things day to day, while living on reduced pay. That is not easy. Usually that has happened through no fault of their own. Some people may have suffered an injury that means that they cannot access public transport because the steps into the bus are too high and so on. They may have to pay for taxis just to do their grocery shopping. Those costs are added on to their everyday living expenses at a time when they are getting less money. Therefore, this is a very important part of the bill. I am really pleased to see that we have taken this initiative and removed the step-down in benefits at the 12-month and two-year milestones. We have certainly improved on that aspect of the legislation.

The vast majority of injured workers want to get back to work. It makes little sense that a seriously injured worker's earnings are continuously reduced on the premise of providing a financial incentive to return to work. Once again, I could never understand this. An injured worker is sitting at home, out of

pocket and not leading their normal life, yet once again they are penalised by having their pay further reduced.

The bill also specifies that Q-COMP can set aside funds for scheme-wide rehabilitation and return-to-work initiatives. These could take the form of graduated return-to-work projects through industry and employee associations, and the provision of specialised advisory services to increase information about and awareness of rehabilitation and return-to-work issues.

The member for Waterford touched on this point. These people do not receive only physical injuries. They are not living their normal lives. A lot of their time is spent sitting at home, unable to do a lot of the normal activities that they were used to doing. They are not doing everyday activities that keep their minds occupied as would happen at work. Therefore their mental health suffers as a result of their work accident. The member for Waterford rightly said that that can be soul destroying. It not only affects them; it also affects their families. Therefore, we need to do all we can to rehabilitate those people and get them back into normal living and the workforce, so that they feel that they are productive and are contributing to their families through working. It is what we should be doing.

Another initiative made possible by the amendment is the funding of approved industry based initiatives for small to medium employees to assist injured workers returning to work where workplace based rehabilitation is not available in key high-risk sectors such as health and community services, construction and manufacturing. Once again, this touches on the mental and physical wellbeing of workers. Sometimes because of the nature of the injury received, the worker cannot go back to the position that they held previously. They need help to make sure that they can return to a normal workplace and to the conditions and the pay that they were receiving before their injury occurred. Certainly we should be looking at how we can help those people back into the workplace.

The bill signals a new focus on rehabilitation and return-to-work measures as the best way to benefit injured workers, their employers and the workers compensation scheme. While I have focused mostly on the injured party, I can say that it is also to the benefit of the employers to make sure that their workers are back on deck and working for them, obviously in terms of their productivity but also in terms of teamwork. The moral support that is given to an injured employee can have an impact on other employees in the organisation. I have met constituents who have been involved in serious accidents. Some of them tell me how their employers have helped them as much as they can. Certainly that very positive attitude can flow throughout the workplace. It is certainly not one-sided. I believe that in this bill we have the balance right. I commend the bill to the House.