



Speech by

**Jack Dempsey**

**MEMBER FOR BUNDABERG**

Hansard Thursday, 24 May 2007

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## **HEALTH AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr DEMPSEY** (Bundaberg—NPA) (12.36 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Health and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. It is a very positive step in the right direction to implement measures to improve the delivery of health services. I thank the health minister, as I am sure that this amendment bill will save the lives of many Queenslanders. These changes are real common-sense implementations, and although they are long overdue are very welcomed.

The implementation of the root cause analysis will be beneficial in providing a system of problem solving that involves examining the events at a deeper level. It is simply common sense to try to find the root of a problem in order to fix it rather than applying a quick solution.

On numerous occasions the recent inquiries into health identified a lack of examination and review as one of the root causes that led to Dr Patel being able to practise for so long. It is my sincerest hope that the introduction of the root cause analysis will prevent a similar disaster happening again. This system, however, must not be used as a tool to create a culture of fear and concealment within Queensland Health but used as a mechanism to provide positive feedback.

I am glad to see that the root cause analysis will be granted statutory privilege and that adequate measures have been taken to allow proper investigation into events. Root cause analysis should be a positive tool to be used to improve services and resources for the staff of Queensland Health and the people of Queensland. It is inevitable in life that things will go wrong from time to time. When it comes to health services, this is as true as anywhere else. But when these things happen assistance to examine the root cause of the incidents can only be of benefit.

It must also be said that much of the distress caused to the hardworking staff and patients within Queensland Health could have been avoided if such a policy had been in place and followed. I encourage the current government to start conducting its own root analysis into the many other problems currently facing this state. Changes to the Mental Health Act is another important issue to the people of Bundaberg and Burnett.

While I thank the health minister for the amendments that allow greater flexibility to the Mental Health Courts and the appointments of more judges, Bundaberg currently does not have the same qualified mental health staff to deal with acute mentally ill patients that it had only a few years ago.

The closure of the Bundaberg mental health unit in August 2005 was initially due to staff shortages. I encourage this government to secure sufficient permanent staff to return this unit to its previous operating capacity within Bundaberg. In the period of less than a year from August 2005 to May 2006 over 140 mental health patients were transferred from Bundaberg to either the Sunshine Coast or Rockhampton. This was a stopgap measure and it falls far short of what the people of Bundaberg deserve.

Firstly, it removes these people from their families and natural support networks and takes us back to the bad old days of taking mentally ill people and locking them up in institutions away from their families and friends. People with mental health issues need the care and support of their families and friends, and moving them four hours away must have a negative impact on their recovery. Secondly, to transport these patients at different times of the day, depending on staff availability, has at times required two police

officers, an ambulance officer or extra health workers depending on the type of situation. This journey for health care takes between three to four hours each way, which means that the local police and ambulance service is short by one or two officers and a vehicle for anywhere up to eight hours. This would not be of great concern if there were enough police and if acute mental cases were able to time their severe breakdowns to fit in with staffing rosters.

I understand that every community wants police and we have to have a common-sense approach. However, police resources should not be abused due to long-term deficiencies in another government department. Police resources are being stretched beyond their limits, and this is no more evident than when local dedicated and hardworking police recently had to close their successful domestic violence unit due to a shortage of staff and prioritising of police on the street. The reason reported to the media by this government for the closure of this vital and effective unit was the cessation of a trial period, a trial period that extended over three years and identified that a significant percentage of all assaults in the Bundaberg district were related to domestic violence.

This was an excellent unit and worked in a hand-in-glove partnership with all community groups and court representatives to achieve successful and positive outcomes for the benefit of the community. Any success in the reduction and eradication of domestic violence must be applauded, and I look forward to the establishment of this unit or a similar program in Bundaberg and across the state in the future when an examination of the trial has been completed by this government. This is a clear example where root cause analysis should be used for the benefit of the whole community as they are the ones who have to carry the burden of the problems caused by these situations.

Mental health carers should not be left to deal with patients without sufficient support. Police officers obviously have a duty of care to assist with the more extreme cases and while the Bundaberg police are some of the finest officers in the state, the Police Service is not the appropriate institution to be dealing with mental health as this continues to be a care, not a custody, situation. The community would not expect doctors to be running around enforcing the law. Police officers should not be expected to pick up on inadequacies in mental health.

Mental health is an issue of health and care and should be dealt with by caring professionals. It should not be a matter for crime and custody which has been experienced by number of Bundaberg constituents. Shortly after the mental health unit was closed a constituent was taken into custody on a number of charges. When this constituent appeared before the court the defence explained that the defendant was unable to give them instructions or even answer a plea due to mental health issues. The local magistrate at the time ordered an immediate assessment of the constituent. The prosecutor for this matter also explained that the closure of the Bundaberg mental health unit had made it difficult to put people into care for assessment. The local magistrate later stated that had a proper mental health unit been operating the defendant would not have been before the court.

Mental health is a difficult situation for all involved. While I applaud this legislation for giving the Mental Health Court better resources to perform its legal duties, it must also have ready access to facilities where people with mental health issues can seek assessment and help in a caring and supportive environment. I also applaud the dedicated and caring staff of the Bundaberg mental health unit who have endured a number of significant changes in recent years and continue to work hard for the people of Bundaberg. These remarkable staff members work in an extremely difficult environment and achieve great success due to their passionate and enthusiastic support for their patients. The significant benefits identified by the establishment of the assertive support program team and the dedication of all those involved is also to be commended.

The other part of this legislation that I will speak on is the banning of the sale of drug implements and devices, especially ice pipes. This has been long overdue and was previously a restricted piece of legislation where the sale of drugs is illegal but the sale of implements to use them was not. It made absolutely no sense and has been causing much confusion in this government's stance towards drugs. We have a responsibility to educate our youth and the wider community of the danger of drugs and take the cool factor out of drug use.

I welcomed the health minister's words when he stated that the display and sale of these pipes only feeds the perception that smoking methamphetamine is an acceptable and regular activity and that this bill seeks to redress this situation. Queensland's state Drug Squad statistics show that the detection of drug labs in Queensland are at an average of over 200 a year compared to other states such as New South Wales and Victoria where the average is fewer than 15. This is not a proud statistic and we should use every government agency and an interdepartmental approach to reduce this alarming statistic and get rid of this scourge which is affecting the lives of many Queensland families. It is only by working together through education, health and enforcement that we will be able to reduce the effects of this problem that affects so many people of all ages in our community. In closing, we have to send a strong message that we do not want harmful drugs in our community and that the cost in financial burden and human life to our community is unacceptable.