



Speech by

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PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—Lib) (11.50 am): I have to rise this morning to draw to the attention of Queensland and the parliament of Queensland two more crises in our health system. It is interesting that in this parliament we often hear the Labor government talking about WorkChoices and about the fact that Australian workplace agreements supposedly erode workers' employment conditions and rights in the workplace. Yet in Queensland this criticism comes from the very same government that has for some time starved employees in its shambolic health department of satisfactory work conditions and reasonable equitable remuneration. I am referring to medical radiation professionals.

Having made an explicit commitment to interest based bargaining with MRPs late last year, bureaucrats in Queensland Health have reneged on their promise, changing the rules of play without any consultation with MRPs or their union. Last year in December the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission ordered MRPs not to resign en masse as they were talking about doing on 31 December, and Queensland Health said that it would negotiate with the MRPs. But over the past seven months I, along with hundreds of medical radiation professionals in Queensland, have been perpetually frustrated and ashamed about the way in which this egotistical Labor government has treated these hardworking individuals with contempt and apathy for their cause.

In the MRP group's endeavour to negotiate fair and better working conditions with Queensland Health, the government has painted a picture of MRPs as penny pinchers without any regard to the merits of their crusade. MRPs right across Queensland are worried about their future, but more importantly they are worried about the future of radiation services in Queensland. These services are critical to our health system. CT scans, ultrasounds, MRIs, angiography, sonography and radiation therapy all rely on the expertise of MRPs in order to be carried out effectively. I was contacted by a radiation therapist who said the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists audit found that 42 per cent of urgent curative cancer patients in Queensland were treated beyond maximum acceptable time frames. That figure is double the national average. It means that people are dying in our system. Yet, despite the integral role they play in keeping the embattled health system afloat, Queensland Health refuses to recognise their importance, demonstrated by its refusal to work with its own staff to resolve this impasse.

The Beattie Labor government's reactionary Health Action Plan that it is allegedly implementing within Queensland Health is not a whole-of-profession fix for the raft of problems plaguing it. The Premier and health minister are quick to boast about their success in recruiting more doctors and nurses to Queensland with an apparent disregard to the allied health professionals such as MRPs who work just as hard as their medico colleagues to sustain and maintain health services for the benefit of patients. It does not take a rocket scientist to realise that unless working conditions, including fair conditions and competitive remuneration compared with our neighbouring states, are improved these much-vaunted additions to staff numbers are not going to be in it for the long haul. Retention will be achieved when attention is given to working conditions, ensuring working environments are safe, salary arrangements are just and the necessary support systems and amenities for staff are in place.

The Gold Coast Hospital is a perfect case in point for the recruitment and retention problems currently being experienced in Queensland Health. The situation at the Gold Coast Hospital continues to deteriorate, putting patients' lives at risk while the government does backflips and forces its employees to jump through hoops in negotiating better conditions not only for themselves but also for Queenslanders who rely on the public health system.

The Gold Coast Hospital, a major tertiary hospital servicing almost half a million people, is about to lose two radiographers out of only six. One of the four ultrasound facilities has had to be closed due to a lack of staff and a recent campaign to recruit two senior MRPs failed to secure any applications. An additional 10 radiographers will be required when the Robina Hospital's emergency department, intensive care unit and surgical unit become operational later this year. If we cannot fill two positions, how on earth are we going to fill 10?

Redcliffe Hospital has a similar story. That hospital has lost three highly skilled MRPs recently. The service in Mackay is under serious threat because there is no-one to operate the services. Those who do keep the service barely running work incredibly long hours, as they have testified to me in their emails. They work long and dangerous hours and are constantly on call. They are compromising their quality of life for the betterment of health services, yet Queensland Health will not compromise in negotiating a better deal for them which would ultimately benefit—but in this case disadvantage—its patients.

The second calamity I want to draw attention to before my time expires is the government's ill-considered plan to shift public hospital palliative care services at Robina Hospital to a private clinic opposite the Southport Hospital, which is unable to provide the same level of care to patients. This is a politically motivated move with little regard for the people whose lives it affects. Shuffling services to beat bed block is another example of the bad management of Queensland Health by this government. The Beattie government has spent years ignoring the health needs of the Gold Coast and greater Queensland until they reach crisis point. Nine years is long enough. It is time to take positive action.