



Speech by

Peter Lawlor

MEMBER FOR SOUTHPORT

Hansard Wednesday, 8 August 2007

MEDICAL POSITIONS

Mr LAWLOR (Southport—ALP) (5.47 pm): I second the amendment moved by the Minister for Health. The chronic shortage of doctors and other health professionals continues to be the biggest problem facing health care in Australia. It is a problem that the Howard government has created. What has happened under the Commonwealth is a failure to supply Australians with enough Australian trained doctors. That is a Commonwealth responsibility that has not been delivered on for over a decade.

Michael Wooldridge, a former federal health minister in the Howard government, is on record stating that the way to keep Medicare costs under control is to limit university places to study medicine and thereby limit the number of Medicare licences. But it takes almost 10 years to educate and train a doctor. This is not a tap that can be simply turned on and off at will.

What is the result? Australia and Queensland have become more and more reliant on foreign trained doctors. As of 1 July this year 2,187 overseas trained doctors are registered and working in Queensland in both the public and private sector. Following recent events maybe that should be reduced by two. Nevertheless, the number working here is quite substantial. That is 14.5 per cent of the 15,037 doctors currently registered in Queensland. Without these doctors, the majority of whom work in rural areas, the Queensland health system would simply collapse. Without them we would see more and more patients in the bush having to travel to Brisbane and other regional cities to receive treatment. We would see a range of services shut down if we stopped importing doctors, dentists and health professionals.

We greatly value the wonderful work that they do in our public hospitals and GP clinics right across the state. For example, in Southport we have a wonderful privately owned and run service called Medcall run by Dr Tom Challenger and his parents, Tom senior and Gina. They conduct a home visit 24-hour service for which they bulk-bill.

Mrs Reilly: I've used it a couple of times. It's a great service.

Mr LAWLOR: The member for Mudgeeraba has used it. They cannot get sufficient GPs in Australia and must get them from overseas.

There is a huge delay with Immigration and so on and they struggle to maintain this service. They are in fact training practitioners for Australia, because recently 10 doctors that they had trained defected en masse to South Australia. This service takes the pressure off the accident and emergency section of the Gold Coast Hospital, because I did a survey about five years ago and of 17 GP practices in Southport only two of them bulk-billed. So they are providing an unbelievable service, but because we have not got suitably trained doctors in Australia they have to get them from overseas.

A country of Australia's size and economy should not be importing doctors, as has been mentioned by the Minister for Health. Many of these doctors come from Third World countries. They should not be enticed from their countries where their expertise is desperately needed. Australia gets shown up by countries such as Cuba, a country with 11 million people. A couple of years ago there was a severe earthquake in Pakistan and Cuba sent over 2,000 doctors to assist them. The oldest dictatorship in the world has a much better system for producing medical professionals than Australia. What an indictment of

the Howard federal government! We should be training enough of our own doctors and health professionals and indeed even exporting doctors to countries less fortunate than ourselves.

The member for Tablelands and the opposition should remember this when debating these important health issues. The government has been forced to train our own doctors in Queensland through Griffith University on the Gold Coast and also through our rural scholarships schemes. On 25 January this year it was announced that Beattie government scholarships have increased the number of Queensland medical students commencing studies to an expected 669—107 more than last year. Premier Beattie and the health minister visited Griffith University on the Gold Coast and welcomed 150 new medical students, including 50 state government scholarship holders. Queensland's four medical schools anticipate 669 domestic medical students starting next year—the highest number ever. The state government is doing its bit for training of medical professionals. It is about time the government that has the responsibility for this—that is, the Howard government—took responsibility. I commend the amended motion to the House.