



Speech by

Rosa Lee Long

MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS

Hansard Tuesday, 13 March 2007

QUEENSLAND HEALTH

Ms LEE LONG (Tablelands—ONP) (12.20 pm): Last week in this House I raised the case of a young mother of five who died after attempting to get medical treatment on three separate occasions from her local public hospital. Since then, a Queensland Health representative has been reported as saying that the treatment this woman received was 'appropriate'. Let me describe the treatment that this department considered appropriate for someone who was dying right before their eyes.

On Sunday, 7 January, just five days before she died, this very ill mother presented at the Mareeba Hospital where she waited for about three hours before being seen by a doctor. He found that she was dehydrated and that her body was starving. He put her on a drip for about 30 minutes, took some blood for testing, told her to take her own painkillers and sent her away. By Tuesday, 9 January, three days before she died, this woman continued to feel extremely ill. So she presented again at this hospital. This time, another doctor attended her after about another three-hour wait. This doctor told her that he had some of the blood test results, which showed that she had a problem with her liver and rigorously interrogated her about her drinking habits, to which she replied repeatedly that she did not drink alcohol at all. This doctor also looked at this woman's sore leg, which was so painful that she could not walk on it. The doctor also spent a lot of time on the phone. Then the doctor turned her away without treatment, advising her again to take her own painkillers and to go home.

The next morning, the Wednesday, this woman was so close to death that she was carried into the hospital by her husband where, after another three-hour wait, she was sent to an unmanned X-ray department. There she was found some time later by her husband slumped in a chair, alone, crying, distressed and in pain. He wheeled her back to the doctor's room. The superintendent arrived midafternoon and a decision was made to send her to the Cairns Base Hospital. I ask members to remember that, on this occasion, this woman still had not received any treatment.

Deciding how to get this woman to Cairns seemed problematic. Usually, the car trip takes about three-quarters of an hour, but they decided to get a helicopter, which takes about 15 minutes. The trouble was that it was about four hours later before the helicopter delivered this woman to Cairns Base Hospital. The helicopter did not get to Mareeba until after 6.30 pm and the woman did not arrive in Cairns until about 7 pm. Sadly, just after 6 am the next morning this young nursing mother of five children, aged 10 years and under, died.

Since then the acting district manager of the Cairns Health Service District has announced that a review of this woman's treatment had concluded that it was 'appropriate'. But how can that be so when the treatment of this dying woman at the Mareeba Hospital was almost negligible? That is simply an insult not only for the family but also to the community and to all mothers, particularly nursing mothers.

Many questions are being asked, including the following: what are the doctors' qualifications? Did they require supervision? Were there any instructions to turn people away? Were there enough beds available? Were there enough wards open? Was there enough staff on duty on each occasion? Why was this woman given little or no treatment until she reached Cairns Base Hospital? Why was this woman left

alone at a closed X-ray department? Why was there such indecision about how to take this woman to Cairns? Why did the helicopter take so long to get to Mareeba Hospital?

We have seen no real changes since the Bundaberg debacle and the Forster, Davies and CMC inquiries, since the promise of \$9.7 billion to fix this government's failed health system and the budget surpluses that this government pats itself on the back about each year. Just last week recognition of Labor's failings was made by the acting health minister, who admitted that there are still about 500 beds fewer in our hospitals than there were 10 years ago, even though today we have about a million more people in Queensland—and the population is rising. The acting health minister referred to an Australian Medical Association press release, which recognised that poor performances at hospitals may be because they are not properly resourced, or for a number of other reasons.

The reasons this woman died are probably many and varied, but it is difficult to reasonably conclude that her treatment at the Mareeba Hospital was appropriate. If that really is Queensland Health's conclusion, then I believe that anyone presenting at a Queensland public hospital should be very concerned indeed. In the four days between when this mother of five first presented at this hospital to when she left to attend another hospital, her treatment consisted of about half an hour on a drip and twice being told to go home and take her own painkillers. I again call for an independent inquiry into this particular case as this family, the community and the people of Queensland deserve better answers than they are getting to maintain their faith in the public hospital system that this government is giving them.