



Speech by

**Rosa Lee Long**

**MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS**

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

**Ms LEE LONG** (Tablelands—ONP) (4.51 pm): My contribution to the debate on the Mental Health and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2007 will focus on the recognition of victims' needs which are finally being recognised in a substantive way. This bill is a result of the review of the Mental Health Act carried out by Mr Brendan Butler. The so-called Butler report was presented to the government in December last year. It dealt in large part with the concerns raised through the community consultation process with the way victims of violence and other crimes committed by people who were or who became subject to mental health orders were treated.

The explanatory notes make several references to how victims, their families and others were treated. This treatment is described as disrespectful. They felt unacknowledged, unsupported, uninformed and unable to meaningfully contribute to the mental health process. It needs to be kept in mind that we are talking about people who have already suffered loss or injury or even the death of loved one because of the actions of someone else. I believe it is shameful that we have had a system in Queensland that has, at an institutional level, treated victims and their families in such a disgraceful manner.

The rights of patients will be affected in a very minor way. However, the protections are extensive. No information likely to harm the patient can be released. No information about the medical, treatment or diagnostic aspects of their condition can be released and so on. What can be released under the amendments before us today is limited information about forensic and classified patients. This information will, according to the explanatory notes, relate to the movements of patients and judicial processes only. This information will be made available via a new Victim Support Service and must come through the Director of Mental Health to ensure that it meets the relevant guidelines. Victims will also be able to make statements to proceedings of the Mental Health Review Tribunal in a similar way to the process in place for the Mental Health Court. The tribunal will be required to provide a statement of reasons for taking or not taking such a statement into account in its deliberations.

I believe it is true to say that many people believe the balance in our courts in criminal matters and in matters relating to classified and forensic patients has been too far in favour of the offender, or patient. In line with some of recommendations of the Butler report, this legislation provides a small but welcome shift in that balance in favour of the victims. However, it is vital to recognise that those among us who are confronted with a mental illness are faced with a desperately underfunded and underresourced health system. In my electorate, which is approximately the size of Tasmania, there is not one dedicated mental health bed. The closest facility is at the Cairns Base Hospital and it, like so many Queensland health services, is staffed largely by dedicated professionals who face an impossible task to meet the needs of sufferers while battling limited funding from government. There are many in the Tablelands electorate who have had to and still are facing changing circumstances particularly in relation to the closing of and changes to so many industries. This has caused a great deal of anxiety and its effects are far-reaching.

There are hardworking mental health staff on the tablelands but they face not only the challenges of dealing with such difficult issues but added hurdles in terms of distance, geography and a tremendous diversity of languages and cultures among the population. There are more than 60 language groups in my electorate. I believe that prevention is always better than cure, and more funding coupled with better

programs and accessibility may allow mental health sufferers to get the assistance they need before matters reach the stage where there are victims. I support the bill.