



Speech by

Robert Messenger

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard Tuesday, 24 November 2009

BUNDABERG HOSPITAL DENTAL CLINIC, STERILISATION

Mr MESSENGER (Burnett—LNP) (12.00 pm): Despite what the health minister has said this morning in the House about the latest victims of the Bundaberg Base Hospital, the fact remains that 268 people still have to wait 12 weeks to get the final all clear on their blood test results because of a mistake by Queensland Health. That wait has and will have a significant impact on those individuals and their families. No amount of political spin will lessen their hurt.

Today, the member for Bundaberg and I have a meeting with the health minister, where I expect him to guarantee three things in relation to the victims of the Bundaberg dental crisis. They are: No. 1, that the Deputy Premier will authorise the payment of the private dental costs of the victims who require further follow-up dental treatment and choose to use one of the Burnett's or Bundaberg's private dentists; No. 2, that the Deputy Premier will authorise an immediate financial assistance package of \$5,000 to be delivered before Christmas to partly compensate victims for the trauma, shock, pain and damages they have suffered as a result of a Queensland government mistake; and, No. 3, that the Queensland government will put in place a special compensation process designed to mediate a just, fair and final compensation amount on top of the \$5,000 for the victims of the latest health crisis.

Early on Monday morning of 16 November I was contacted by three victims of the Bundaberg dental crisis who, because of a Queensland Health failure to ensure proper sterilisation of dental equipment, had been placed at risk of contracting HIV, hepatitis A, B and C and other medical conditions. At 10 am on 16 November I met personally with two of these very upset and traumatised victims in my office and listened to their experiences. No member of this House should be ignorant of the trauma and pain these individuals and their families suffered and are still suffering.

During that morning we did not know how many other people had been affected. Because there was no public announcement or information from the health minister I suspected a cover-up. While I composed a letter to the minister I also contacted the media and alerted them to the situation. After a barrage of media inquiries and a letter from my office, the health minister's department was finally forced late on Monday afternoon to acknowledge its mistake publicly and release a statement which admitted to the facts that on Friday, 6 November the dental equipment used on 33 patients at the Bundaberg dental clinic had not been cleaned properly. The mistake had not been discovered for a week. Consequently, a further 235 patients between Friday, 6 November and Black Friday, Friday, 13 November may have been treated with unclean dental equipment.

The latest crisis has highlighted some serious systemic failures in the health department. The minister told the media that he did not find out about the dental crisis—and he repeated those allegations in the parliament—until three days after the mistake was discovered at the hospital. The minister says he was notified about the crisis on Monday, 16 November. Yet the manager and the oral health director at the Bundaberg Base Hospital told four of the victims and me that the office of the director-general for health was informed about the mistake on Friday, 13 November.

After approximately 21 minutes of conversation I asked the hospital manager, Beth Norton, 'When was the director-general notified?' She specifically replied, 'We sent something through at approximately

five o'clock.' Why did it take almost three days for the Queensland health minister to be informed by his director-general that a serious health crisis affecting hundreds of my constituents had occurred?

The investigation had not been completed and yet the health minister was in Bundaberg—after failing to speak with any victims on Friday, 20 November—denying that a faulty sterilising machine had caused the crisis. He pointed the finger of blame at staff. He said, 'So we have had a failure of procedure here and I'm not going to cop any explanations about equipment when there has been a failure in procedure.' This is completely at odds with the explanation the oral health director gave to four victims and me on Wednesday, 18 November when he said that he could not give a guarantee that it was human error and the sterilising machine at the centre of the failure had not been tested or validated by a technician and was still in use five days after the failure was discovered.

Why did the minister, when he visited on Friday afternoon, ignore the victims and their families who wanted to meet with him personally? There is one conclusion. The families of Bundaberg and the Burnett have to endure a public dental waiting list of at least 8½ years. It is no wonder that failures occur. This government needs to properly fund and resource public dental care at the Bundaberg Base Hospital.