




Speech By
Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

HEALTH PRACTITIONER REGISTRATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (11.24 am): This bill is a lost opportunity for the Queensland government to show leadership in health workforce reform. Abolishing state registration for the speech pathology and dental technician professions is a backward step. Deregistration is not required under national health workforce reforms and the transition to national registration for those professions should continue to be supported by the Queensland government.

Over the past five years, the federal Labor government has pursued a national health reform agenda to build an agreed division of responsibilities for health financing and for the delivery of health services between the states and the Commonwealth. This LNP government has effectively torn up those national agreements through savage budget cuts and the resulting mass sackings and closures of essential health services. This LNP government is in denial about the \$3 billion in cuts over the next four years that it has imposed on our hospitals and health services. Dressed up as 'efficiency requirements' and 'devolution of decision making', those cuts have gutted community based health services and our hospitals are now closing beds and operating theatres.

The federal Labor government has made major reforms in the national management of the Australian health workforce. Those reforms have included the creation of Health Workforce Australia to forecast supply and demand for various health professions across all jurisdictions and to initiate change, collaboration and innovation to build a sustainable health workforce that meets the healthcare needs of all Australians.

In March 2008, COAG signed the Intergovernmental Agreement for a National Registration and Accreditation Scheme for the Health Professions, which provides for a single national registration and accreditation scheme for health professions, a national scheme to transition state and territory based schemes. COAG agreed to the inclusion of 10 professions into the national scheme from 1 July 2010. Those professions were medicine, nursing and midwifery, optometry, osteopathy, chiropractic, pharmacy, physiotherapy, podiatry, psychology and dentistry and other oral health professions. In July 2012, four further professions transitioned to the national scheme managed by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. Those professions were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioners, Chinese medicine practitioners, medical radiation practitioners and occupational therapists.

Much to their dismay, speech pathologists and dental technicians were not included in those initial rounds of the national scheme. The justification for this decision by AHPRA rested on perception of risk to the public. While the level of risk attributed to occupational therapists was considered sufficient to warrant inclusion in the national registration scheme, it was not for speech pathologists. This decision has been disputed by Speech Pathology Australia and it is still negotiating with AHPRA for inclusion in the national scheme. To support their objections, Speech Pathology Australia cites the invasive nature of a number of clinical procedures in the throat and the fact that many of their patients are vulnerable and people with a disability.

Registration provides a number of protections for the public against poor practice by individual practitioners. Those protections include the ability to suspend or reprimand clinicians for unsafe or unethical practice. Those public protections are not available where health practitioners are unregistered and practice standards are self-regulated through certification by professional associations. The following oral health professionals are included in the national scheme: dentists, oral health therapists, dental therapists, dental hygienists and dental prosthetists. Dental prosthetists are normally also qualified as dental technicians. Submissions to the Health and Community Services Committee on this bill clearly stated that dental technicians are an integral part of this oral health clinical team. Submissions by dental technicians, their professional association and by the Dental Technicians Board of Queensland have all argued for inclusion in the national registration scheme to ensure appropriate standards of care and patient safety. For dental technicians, there remain serious safety issues with preventing iatrogenic infection, including HIV and hepatitis C.

The primary objective of this bill is to abolish the state registration scheme for the dental technology and speech pathology professions. The bill will also abolish the Office of Health Practitioner Registration Boards, redeploying or retrenching eight staff. Dental technicians and speech pathologists practising in Queensland wish to remain registered. Indeed, a number of practitioners in other states retain Queensland registration to support the profession in its transition to national registration. While those professions are not currently registered elsewhere in Australia, they have been in the past. Speech pathologists were previously registered in the Northern Territory. Dental technicians were previously registered in four other jurisdictions. Queensland is the only state or territory with state based registration of health professionals.

While the LNP government is claiming that the legislative changes presented in this bill are to bring Queensland into line with other jurisdictions under the national scheme, they are, in fact, cost-cutting exercises that undermine the potential for wider health workforce reform. A number of other unregulated or more correctly self-regulating professionals are also seeking national registration. Those include, most vigorously, social workers, as well as audiologists, exercise physiologists, sports scientists, sonographers and prosthetists and orthotists. Perhaps if sports scientists were a regulated profession with appropriate practice standards and mandatory CPD requirements, the current scandals involving AFL and NRL may not have occurred.

AHPRA is resisting any further expansion of the national scheme on cost grounds. A number of professional associations are working on processes for enhanced self-regulation and certification while in parallel pressuring AHPRA to reconsider its position.

The Queensland government has the opportunity here to provide national leadership in the health workforce reform agenda by maintaining state registration for dental technicians and speech pathologists while these processes for national registration are worked through. The speech pathology and dental technician professions are registered in a number of comparable countries and provinces overseas and it is only a matter of time before they will be in Australia.

The burden of registration used as part justification for this bill is overstated as an overwhelming number of current practitioners support continuing registration and oppose deregistration. Speech Pathology Australia has surveyed their members with findings indicating overwhelming support for continued registration in Queensland and for achieving national registration in the near future.

The costs of maintaining the Queensland registration boards are met by professionals' fees. There are certainly opportunities for greater efficiency in the operations of the Office of Health Practitioner Registration Boards. The staff establishment of this office has been progressively reduced from 15 staff to eight. Further efficiencies are achievable if the functions of the Office of Health Practitioner Registration Boards were rolled into the health workforce system manager role of Queensland Health.

There were discussions to this effect before the LNP government took office but that has not now been pursued. Choosing this policy option, rolling the Office of Health Practitioner Registration Boards into Queensland Health, would contain costs, reduce pressure to raise registration fees and maintain state registration as a platform for national registration in the near future.

This government seems intent on attacking our health workforce. The minister has made this clear in his attacks on the nursing profession. Our nurses are standing up for their patients and their communities as services are cut and staff sacked. This LNP government has, with this bill, shown a lack of leadership in health workforce reform. Instead of supporting the speech pathology and dental

technician professions, this LNP government has chosen to sack more staff, leaving chaos, uncertainty and a demoralised workforce in their wake.

Good health policy requires leadership, cooperation and coordination. Health policy under the LNP appears to focus on staff cuts, service closure and now potentially privatisation. The opposition has serious concerns about the impact of this bill on the dental technician and speech pathology professions and on their future participation in the national registration scheme for health practitioners.