




Speech By  
**Aaron Harper**

**MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA**

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Record of Proceedings, 12 May 2016

## **HOSPITAL AND HEALTH BOARDS (SAFE NURSE-TO-PATIENT AND MIDWIFE-TO-PATIENT RATIOS) AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr HARPER** (Thuringowa—ALP) (5.38 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Hospital and Health Boards (Safe Nurse-to-Patient and Midwife-to-Patient Ratios) Amendment Bill 2015. As a fellow health professional, I am very proud to be part of this in our parliament today. We are making history.

Patient safety in all of our many health services across this state is vital and paramount. The Queensland public rightly have an expectation that when their loved one is in hospital the very best medical and nursing care is demonstrated and applied. As members of this government, we are therefore entrusted to ensure that we do everything in our capacity to get the balance right when it comes to safe nurse-patient ratios. I would go further to say that we also have an obligation to the Queensland public and to the thousands of nurses—those dedicated souls—who work tirelessly and professionally. I know they want us in the parliament to get the balance right to ensure patient care and patient safety remain paramount throughout our broad and challenging health service.

How appropriate it is that we debate this bill in this House on International Nurses Day? I must take a moment to not only recognise the fantastic nurses who are watching this live streamed debate in the House but also acknowledge the many nurses, some of whom have travelled from my home town in Townsville, in the public gallery and to simply say thank you. Thank you to our state's nurses for your care, compassion and dedication to your profession. As a fellow health professional, I have had the pleasure of working with some of you over the years—as a paramedic I handed over many a patient to nurses—and you each have my and our government's absolute respect for your individual contributions to our health services.

I commend the health minister not only for bringing this bill before the House but also for restoring the 1,800 nurse and midwife positions lost under the former LNP government. His department should be commended. It has worked tirelessly to ensure the Palaszczuk government's commitment in the nursing guarantee policy through our legislative framework enables safe nurse-to-patient ratios and workload provisions to be mandated in our public health service facilities. I also want to acknowledge the work of our committee, our secretariat, our outstanding chair, the member for Nudgee, and all of my fellow committee members, some of whom bring extensive experience in nursing, ambulance or medicine. I speak particularly of my fellow committee member the member for Greenslopes, Joe Kelly, who is a registered nurse. The member for Moggill through his work in the AMA, must also see the importance of what we are doing here today. I also acknowledge the member for Mudgeraba with her years of nursing experience. Surely both those non-government members can see the importance of what we are doing here today and can look beyond that exterior view that this is an ideological argument about cost. Yes, there is cost. We are spending \$200 million to ensure that 4,000 nurse graduates and 400 nurse navigators are put in place over the next four years, but it is about getting the balance right. We will miss those fellow committee members who bring that clinical experience to the table. I am not for a second saying that the member for Caloundra does not bring experience or an understanding of the health system—he certainly does—but you cannot buy the years of clinical experience.

The committee travelled to learn from different states such as Western Australia and Victoria, both of which gave positive submissions to the nurse-to-patient ratio bill that we are introducing in Queensland. I note that the evidence from our interactions across Queensland did not differ from the other states we spoke to. I also note with interest the various submissions and draw the member for Moggill's attention in the hope of seeking bipartisan support to submission No. 5 from the Australian College for Emergency Medicine where it stated that it has a vital interest in ensuring the highest standards of care are maintained for all patients across Australia. Whilst its comments are in relation to emergency departments, it notes nurse-patient ratios are dependent upon many factors, including patient acuity, which of course is also seen in surgical and medical wards throughout our hospitals—the very areas where we are ensuring nurse-patient ratios are aimed at getting the balance right. Earlier today the member for Surfers Paradise asked what this will achieve. Patient flow may well be eased due to the substantial body of evidence through extensive research that clearly demonstrates that a reduced length of stay for patients in our hospitals is due to improved nurse-patient ratios. I love evidence based research because you cannot dispute the facts.

That significant and extensive research that I speak of has been undertaken over the last 20 years in over 32 countries and has shown that a high number of nurses relative to the number of patients has a positive impact on patient outcomes including decreased length of stays, which has clear economic benefits to our health system, and reduced patient mortality, which is very important. As I stated earlier, these studies also demonstrate improved patient safety. Even better for our nursing staff through the collection of evidence, there are reduced work related injuries and absenteeism and improved morale in our broad health sector. Conversely, in the UK the National Health Service identified the negative effects of decreased nursing staff. An example of this is the 2013 Francis report which identified poor clinical care following staff level reductions and more broadly the 2013 Keogh review which found that inadequate nurse staffing levels related to higher mortality rates. This of course is a very telling fact and we need to ensure that we get that balance right in Queensland when it comes to safe nurse-patient ratios.

More recently a 2015 South Korean study reviewed the effects of nurse staffing on patient mortality. This published study's research was undertaken across 14 hospitals involving over 1,000 nurses and 75,000 patients. The average workload for nurses in South Korea is about twice as many as the average workload for nurses in the United States. The findings of this study confirmed that a lower number of nurses relative to patients is associated with a higher patient mortality rate. In the United States the state of California enacted minimum nurse staff requirements in legislation in 2004 and over the next 11 years another 13 states followed suit. In 2009 research was undertaken to highlight the difference that mandated minimum nurse-patient ratios had made regarding patient and staff outcomes. That research showed that nurses are less likely to suffer burnout and are likely to stay in their jobs as a result of the legislation and nurses are less likely to report dissatisfaction with their jobs. Currently, we know that ratios are not mandated in Queensland. Instead, notational roles are determined in public sector health facilities through the application of the Queensland Health Business Planning Framework, or BPF, which is industrially mandated as part of the Queensland nurses' certified agreement. Our government has endorsed minimum ratios of one nurse to every four patients on morning and afternoon shifts and one nurse to seven patients on night shift when it is expected that the workload is reduced due to patients resting.

Broad consultation was conducted by our health committee including our travel to other states where we met with health department representatives in WA and Victoria which have implemented nurse-patient ratios. The Queensland Nurses' Union, the AMA, the QWU, the Together union and private health sector organisations submitted their views. I want to end with the Queensland Nurses' Union submission, because it sums it up absolutely beautifully through the following quote from renowned researcher Professor Linda Aiken when she said—

The primary function of nurses is to provide early surveillance and to detect problems that could lead to death and other complications. If there aren't enough nurses at the bedside with visual contact with patients, nurses don't have a chance of making those decisions.

After listening to many nurses on the Queensland leg of our consultation—and I note that we did not hear one person speak against the bill—the clear and concise message was that patient care comes first and foremost for nurses throughout our public healthcare system.

During our consultation, the clear desire of nurses to do more for their patients was demonstrated and repeated by nurses throughout the regions and in our metropolitan centres. They wished that they had more time to engage, educate—that is to prevent readmission—and told of their patients apologising to them for attending to simple matters, as they felt guilty in requesting a nurse for a particular reason knowing that nursing staff were overworked. The nurses spoke of fatigue and stress, of being overworked where there can be up to a dozen patients to one or two nurses, and simply feeling

like they have not achieved their best for their patients during their shift. Of course, that affects greatly the morale of nurses in an understandably negative way. The nurses we spoke to articulated the feeling of not just wanting to return to the next shift to cop it all over again. They are tired and they have had enough. They only want for their patients. In Townsville, the nurses' clear compassion and caring nature was tangible when a nurse broke down for not being able to be with a mother and her newborn owing to the many others in the ward. As a government we understand this. As a government, we can change this situation by legislating safe nurse-patient ratios in Queensland public health service areas.

As a previously paid healthcare worker in the Queensland Ambulance Service, I pay my utmost respect to the nurses who each day across Queensland in their thousands put on their uniforms and go about their profession of nursing the injured, the newborns, the elderly, and the medical trauma patients in our hospitals. Each and every one of those nurses—from the Gold Coast to the tip of Australia—are to be commended for their dedication to their profession of nursing. They are our true community champions.

I hope that all my fellow members on both sides of the House join with me in acknowledging their outstanding commitment and contribution to our broader health sector. I thank them. I wholeheartedly commend this bill to the House.