




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 20 September 2018

LEGAL AFFAIRS AND COMMUNITY SAFETY COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (3.32 pm): I rise to speak to report No. 13 titled *Oversight of the Office of the Queensland Ombudsman* by the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee, which has oversight responsibilities for the Queensland Ombudsman. This report provides information regarding the performance of the Queensland Ombudsman and his functions over the reporting period of 2016-17. I want to go to a couple of areas under 'Public Reports' on page 10 of the report that was tabled some time ago. One of those reports tabled by the office was the *Patient Travel Subsidy Scheme report: an investigation into the administration of the Patient Travel Subsidy Scheme by Queensland Health*.

I want to remind the House that the LNP doubled the PTSS in 2012 to support people in rural and regional areas who have to travel long distances for medical care. In Burnett there are many residents in Agnes Water and 1770 who travel from their homes to Bundaberg for hospital and specialist appointments—a round trip of some 242 kilometres. Residents eligible for the Patient Travel Subsidy Scheme were formerly able to be subsidised for the cost of travel from their nearest hospital at Gin Gin. This changed in 2015 when the residents' nearest hospital became Bundaberg due to a reluctance on the part of the Wide Bay Hospital and Health Service to include unsealed roads in the travel calculations to the nearest hospital. This is an anomaly in itself and reflects the wide variety of interpretations the various hospital and health services make when applying the PTSS, something that was mentioned in the report.

This value judgement exists in the Wide Bay health service despite the many kilometres that Queenslanders spend driving on unsealed roads to reach services, including health. Patients living in Miriam Vale travel to their nearest hospital, which is in Gladstone. If specialist treatment is not available in Gladstone, they are referred to Bundaberg. Miriam Vale residents are subsidised \$112 to travel between the Gladstone Hospital and Bundaberg Hospital, a trip of some 400 kilometres. In real terms, Miriam Vale residents travel one kilometre further to get from their homes to Bundaberg for treatment—a complete anomaly, as I am sure all members would agree. Agnes Water residents believe this is an anomaly in the PTSS and are keen to see a reassessment of their eligibility for travel to Bundaberg—a round trip of 242 kilometres, something also that the Ombudsman's report clearly articulated.

As a specific example, I have a constituent who travels from Agnes Water to Bundaberg for three sessions per week for renal dialysis. He is not eligible for any assistance with the travel costs for his two weekly return visits. The dialysis service is not available to him in Gladstone due to capacity and he must travel to Bundaberg. As PTSS eligible patients are frequently those on low or fixed incomes, this is causing considerable financial distress. Despite four reviews or audits, including the report in this report, since 2010 of the PTSS by the Queensland Ombudsman and recommendations for change, it appears that Queensland Health continues to do nothing. The only changes were in 2012 when we did what had to be done in doubling the allowances.

The same problems are identified in each review—inconsistencies and flaws related to decentralisation; policies determined by individual hospitals, often leading to inequities and value judgements being made; and the overburdensome application process, leading to long delays in reimbursement for often cash-strapped patients. Pensioners mainly get caught up. It is my belief that we need to seriously consider the payment of travel subsidies for all eligible patients attending special appointments when they are required to travel more than 100 kilometres to meet their nearest hospital. I call on the Minister for Health to take up the cause—listen to what the Ombudsman said—for all Queenslanders in all electorates and to make it a priority to implement the recommendations of the Queensland Ombudsman to address the problem with the PTSS.

Point 4 on page 10 of the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee report deals with the management of child safety complaints. It is only appropriate that we consider what the Ombudsman said in his report about the child safety statistics that are directly related to this report in relation to the complaints process. Once again, we are sadly seeing substantiated cases of children being harmed or at risk on the rise in Queensland.

According to the latest statistics on child safety, 5,799 children were subject to substantiation over the year of this report, an overall increase of 148 children from the year before. In regional terms of child safety substantiations, this has meant an increase of 5.4 per cent in Far North Queensland, eight per cent in Central Queensland, eight per cent in south-west Queensland and an increase of 13.5 per cent in South-East Queensland. In the same period there were 318 substantiated cases of children subject to sexual harm, an increase of 12 cases from the same time the year before.

The Queensland Ombudsman has clearly articulated that more needs to be done from the 2016-17 review of this particular committee's report. When we reflect that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up less than five per cent of the population but represent 37 per cent, we know that this is not good enough.