




Speech By
Aaron Harper

MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA

Record of Proceedings, 27 November 2019

HEALTH TRANSPARENCY BILL

 **Mr HARPER** (Thuringowa—ALP) (4.50 pm): I rise to support the Health Transparency Bill. This bill was a very important piece of work to our committee and has many links to our broader aged-care, palliative care, end-of-life and voluntary assisted dying inquiry and the Earle Haven investigation. Our committee has been extremely busy with those three pieces of important work, all occurring simultaneously. From the start I want to acknowledge the entire secretariat for the work achieved on this. A special mention and thanks to Stephanie Galbraith for her work on our report into health transparency. I also give my thanks to each of the committee members for their hard work.

It was good to hear the minister's comments with regard to the government's response to our recommendations. The intent of this bill is, at its core, to ensure our elderly, vulnerable citizens are looked after safely and well in the residential aged-care facilities in which they reside. I heard the shadow minister's contribution and point out that in the former term we brought in nurse-patient ratios—that is, over 100 nurses up until 1 am—and the opposition vehemently opposed that, so it was not surprising to hear the attack about aged-care ratios on this particular bill from the shadow minister. I know that the residents themselves will be the benefactors of this decision to ensure that our 16 state-run facilities, with Parklands in my electorate of Thuringowa, will provide increased nurse-to-resident ratios. The bill will also provide clarity for families that residents will receive the best level of care, particularly in our state-run facilities, and we hope that the private sector will follow suit.

Sadly, that is not supported by the Commonwealth Department of Health, which stated in a letter that this would create a reporting burden on facilities. Let us hope it listened and paid attention to the royal commission interim report which calls for increased transparency in the aged-care sector. I find it unbelievable that our committee did not receive the level of support we required from the federal agency responsible for ensuring quality and safety is ensured in the aged-care sector. Our requests for information were met with an unwillingness to even engage. We were basically snubbed. The committee's parliamentary inquiry into health transparency was snubbed by that particular agency because it said that it was too busy. Residents and families need confidence in the aged-care sector, yet our committee could not receive the information it requested. What does that say for the families seeking assistance? What hope do they have? The Commonwealth Department of Health and the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission need serious reform if we are going to provide the best and appropriate level of care required in the aged-care sector, because it is well overdue.

The recently released interim report of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety sets out a chronically underfunded and understaffed aged-care system that is letting down some of our most vulnerable Queenslanders. The report states—

We have uncovered an aged care system that is characterised by an absence of innovation and by rigid conformity. The system lacks transparency in communication, reporting and accountability. It is not built around the people it is supposed to help and support, but around funding mechanisms, processes and procedures.

...

This cruel and harmful system must be changed. We owe it to our parents, our grandparents, our partners, our friends ... We owe it to future generations. Older people deserve so much more.

We have found that the aged care system fails to meet the needs of our older, often very vulnerable, citizens. It does not deliver uniformly safe and quality care for older people. It is unkind and uncaring towards them. In too many instances, it simply neglects them.

...

Expert evidence on clinical and personal care has also contributed to our understanding of the extent of substandard care:

- the Dietitians Association of Australia use current research to estimate that 22-50% of people in residential aged care are malnourished

...

- recent Australia research reveals that pressure injuries occur in a third of the most frail aged care residents at the end of their lives
- research involving 150 residential aged care facilities found that 61% of residents were regularly taking psychotropic agents ...

...

- there were 4013 notifications of alleged or suspected physical and/or sexual assaults in aged care in 2017-18.

The report continues—

The aged care system lacks fundamental transparency. Witnesses from the Australian Department of Health told us that there is very little information available to the public about the performance of service providers. The number of complaints against them are not published. The number of assaults in their services are not published. The number of staff they employ to provide care are not published.

...

While there are exceptions, most nurses, carer workers and allied health practitioners delivering care are doing their best in extremely trying circumstances where there are constraints on their time and on the resources available to them.

The same evidence was delivered to Queensland's own parliamentary inquiry into aged care. Given the federal government's responsibility for the regulation and funding of the aged-care sector, Queenslanders are being badly let down by the Morrison government. This is about ensuring that all Queenslanders can be confident that our parents and grandparents and loved ones are treated with respect, dignity and a high level of care that they deserve. The findings of the royal commission are a stark reminder that our current aged-care system is treating people without respect, without dignity and with an appallingly low level of care in some instances.

This government is sickened by the findings of the royal commission. The lack of humanity shown towards Queenslanders in their old age and lack of transparency for loved ones and their families is utterly appalling. Is it too much to ask that Queensland families know that their loved ones who give their life savings to a company to care for them in their old age are getting what they paid for? That is why the Palaszczuk government is acting to do all we can to deliver a better aged-care system in Queensland while we continue to wait for the Morrison government to act. Just this week the Morrison government has announced that it will put back half of the funding it cut from the aged-care system as if this was some great reform or step forward. It is not. Only the Palaszczuk government is doing the hard work to deliver a better aged-care system for all Queenslanders.

This bill will deliver world-class safe staffing levels in our 16 state-run public residential aged-care facilities. We know that staff-to-patient ratios work in the health system and that they save lives and money. Staffing ratios are a vital factor in ensuring that enough people work at a facility to ensure everyone is getting the appropriate level of care and support. Private aged care is the responsibility of the Commonwealth government, but this is an initiative that we believe should be in place for the sake of elderly Queenslanders. We call on the Commonwealth government to follow our lead in Queensland to commit to safe staffing levels in all aged-care facilities.

This bill will require all of the 16 state-run residential aged-care facilities to have a minimum skill mix of 50 per cent nurses and a minimum of 30 per cent registered nurses out of the total care staff team. The bill also requires these public aged-care facilities to provide a minimum of 3.65 hours of nursing and personal care to residents daily. Given the horror stories we have heard from the royal commission and elsewhere of private residential aged-care facilities with one nurse to 100 patients or even one nurse to 200 patients across two separate facilities, these reforms will ensure Queensland Health aged-care facilities are setting the strongest example for the aged-care industry of what it means to provide a high-quality aged-care model which is centred around the person rather than a business model.

We need the Morrison government to follow Queensland's lead. This bill will also require transparency from the aged-care industry. The royal commission interim report stated that the aged-care system lacks fundamental transparency. Even the Commonwealth freely admits that the sector provides very little public information. That is why, as part of this bill, public aged-care facilities will report staffing levels and average daily resident care hours quarterly. In addition, all private aged-care facilities will be asked to publicly report staffing levels and average daily resident care hours quarterly.

Providing public information to elderly Queenslanders and their families is vital to ensuring that they can make the best choice about their living arrangements now and into the future. For the sake of transparency the Palaszczuk government is giving all private aged-care facilities an opportunity to voluntarily share their staffing levels. However, if private aged-care facilities choose not to, we will not be afraid to reveal the identity of those facilities that are unwilling to provide transparent information for elderly Queenslanders and their families. When it comes to transparency and accountability, it makes sense that public and private facilities are on the same playing field. I commend the bill to the House.