



Speech By  
**Aaron Harper**


**MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA**

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Record of Proceedings, 17 March 2020

**MATTER OF PUBLIC INTEREST**

**Coronavirus, Response**

 **Mr HARPER** (Thuringowa—ALP) (1.38 pm): We have seen a very strong, sensible and early response to COVID-19 from the Queensland government. It is certainly a very high priority for all Queenslanders right now and for the foreseeable future. That being said, we still have to respond to other challenges in our state, and we are doing that. I look forward to speaking about other actions we are undertaking in the near future, but for now all members should rightly be focused on our response to COVID-19 and how we can reassure and inform our local communities of the steps we are taking to reduce the spread of community transmission.

As chair of the health committee, I know that we must do that through listening to expert medical advice and through putting in place effective processes, but we cannot do this alone. We must take our communities with us in the challenges we face with COVID-19. In particular, I thank the Premier, the health minister and the Chief Health Officer for their strong leadership in dealing with what is a worldwide global pandemic.

In North Queensland we are used to facing the challenges of cyclones, the recent 2019 monsoonal floods, drought and bushfires, but this will be our toughest fight yet against an invisible enemy—a virus that has had a worldwide impact and seen over 170,000 infections and thousands of deaths reported across countries and regions. In Australia we are not escaping COVID-19; no-one is immune. The gravity of the situation we in Queensland face is enormous. The numbers of infected people increases daily and the economic damage is substantial. I applaud the health minister for ensuring increased capacity by the tripling of our emergency departments and doubling of our ICUs. It is about having had the foresight to purchase additional ventilators and spend over \$25 million to increase medical supplies to face the virus head-on.

By working together, we will try to save as many lives as possible. Through the Queensland government's early actions, such as declaring a health emergency back in January 2020, we have adopted swift and effective processes such as testing through fever clinics and working with the federal government to ensure that self-isolation for those international travellers is backed with strong laws to send a clear message to limit the spread of the virus by strictly adhering to self-isolation processes. It is by following accurate, expert medical advice that we see our communities adopt social distancing and improved hygiene practices. By doing this, we can limit the spread, push down that curve of infection and try our very best to reduce community transmission and save the lives of those most vulnerable—our elderly or those in rural, remote or Indigenous communities. No matter where we in Queensland live, stopping the spread through community transmission must be our priority and focus.

As the member for Thuringowa, only last night I saw images of bare supermarkets such as Coles at Kirwan. I ask my constituents to please think of those most vulnerable in our community and to purchase only what is needed. We have worked with retailers to make changes to expand retail hours to allow people to access the supplies they need. Mr Deputy Speaker, did you ever think we would need

special, early hours for our elderly and pensioners to shop separately from normal shopping hours? I applaud Coles and Woolworths for adopting this practice as I do not want to see members of my community shoved out of the way in what is being described as selfish behaviour and panic buying. Queenslanders are better than and above that. Let us get back to looking after each other. Who might need assistance? Check on our neighbours and pick each other up in times of need. This is what has defined us previously as Queenslanders in natural disasters: that we do not leave behind a mate and we support each other to work together in times of great challenge. COVID-19 is no different.

In Townsville, our hospital is ready. We have a testing lab and a fever clinic. Since 2015 we have employed 124 more doctors, 151 more nurses and 61 additional health professionals—totalling 336 more staff to help tackle this virus. In 2019-20 we invested a record \$1 billion in our hospital and health services. I thank each member of our health staff for the dedication they display daily to help fight this virus and to care for their patients. You can be tested at the fever clinic if you meet the criteria: if you have travelled internationally in the previous 14 days, if you are symptomatic, if you have come into contact with someone who has tested positive and if you display symptoms. Let us not overwhelm our emergency departments or abuse our health staff. There has been a significant increase in our emergency department in Townsville in terms of people wanting testing when they do not meet criteria.