




Speech By
Hon. Dr Steven Miles
MEMBER FOR MURRUMBA

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PUBLIC HEALTH AND OTHER LEGISLATION (EXTENSION OF EXPIRING PROVISIONS) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Hon. SJ MILES** (Murrumba—ALP) (Deputy Premier and Minister for State Development, Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning) (3.09 pm): I rise in support of the Public Health and Other Legislation (Extension of Expiring Provisions) Amendment Bill 2020. On 29 January 2020, which seems like a very long time ago, we declared a public health emergency in Queensland. We were the very first state in the country to do so. In the time since then it feels like the whole world has changed. On every single day since we have been faced with difficult decisions. Some of them were surreal. Who knew that we would ever have to lock down the Chinese international women's football team in one of our hotels, ban dancing or close pubs? More often than not, they were very tough decisions.

I get asked a lot about 29 January 2020. It was the day we reported our first COVID case in Queensland and it was the day that I sat down with the Chief Health Officer to finalise the plans for what she needed to contain the virus. Our Chief Health Officer, Dr Jeannette Young, is the country's longest serving chief health officer. She has managed previous pandemics including SARS and Ebola, and her advice has been crucial in keeping Queenslanders safe. I know her experience is valued in AHPPC meetings with other states and territories, where she has helped to shape national guidelines that have led to Australia's enviable record fighting the spread of the virus. However, our initial briefings were bleak.

Members will remember the briefing we provided on the earliest modelling, which showed that more than 12,000 Queenslanders would die by the end of last year. Since then we have had 1,323 confirmed cases, 1,309 have recovered and, sadly, six lives have been lost, although I note that only one of those contracted the virus here in Queensland. Had those early projections been correct, Queensland's death toll due to COVID-19 would be more than 20 times greater than the number of total cases we have seen. Other countries have not been so fortunate. The UK has had over four million cases and over 100,000 deaths. They remain in a strict lockdown. The US remains the world frontrunner with over 28 million cases and over half a million deaths, which is more American lives lost than in World War II, Pearl Harbour and 9/11 combined. The global death toll is almost 2.5 million and the global case number is now 112 million.

Even though there have been plenty of restless nights thinking about the impact this pandemic has had on Queenslanders, their families, their friends and their communities, we always knew the health response had to come first. In the very early days we injected \$1.2 billion into public hospitals to double intensive care and triple emergency department capacity. We ordered more PPE and brought forward millions of dollars worth of medicines, gloves and masks. We boosted testing capacity and employed extra doctors, nurses and paramedics. We ordered another 110 new ventilators. We boosted the protection of workers by introducing big fines for people who deliberately cough, sneeze or spit on public officials and workers, including shop assistants. We announced an additional \$46.5 million to support the delivery of critical mental health, drug and alcohol services across the state. We even announced that we would purchase an additional hospital, the Gladstone Mater in Central Queensland,

to bolster our resources. On 29 January last year I could not picture a day like Monday when we would be rolling a vaccine out to Queenslanders—at least not nearly this quickly. I am awestruck by the tireless work of our researchers and our health staff.

I have learnt three important lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic that I think must continue to shape our response, both now and in the case of future pandemics. Firstly, it has shown us how vital our world-class free universal healthcare system is—something that Labor has always backed. Our health system and our response to the pandemic is the envy of many countries around the world. I know that the Palaszczuk government will continue to invest to support free public health care and I will keep demanding greater federal investment in our public healthcare system.

Second, for much of last year some accused us of putting health before the economy, but we know that we have to get the health response right first. Countries that opened up too soon have seen thousands die and have suffered worse economically. We cannot create jobs in a lockdown. People cannot find a job when businesses are shut.

Finally, we must continue to act quickly and decisively when outbreaks occur. The virus spreads quickly, even quicker with the newer mutations. Taking the advice of the experts is what has squashed every outbreak and potential outbreak in Queensland so far. That is why it is more important now than ever to ensure that our Chief Health Officer has the powers she needs to continue shepherding Queensland through the pandemic. I am excited about the vaccine but I know it will take till the end of the year at least to get everyone vaccinated with their second shot. Until then we must continue to act on the health advice. We must continue to back our healthcare workers. We must continue to put Queenslanders' health and safety first.

I feel obliged to respond to the attack that the member for Oodgeroo made on my office and my staff. While it might not be possible for him to see, from where he sits, what they were dealing with at that time, I know that they were working incredibly hard. While the matter he raised might have seemed to him to be the most important thing, I can assure him that we were dealing with thousands of inquiries just like that one. Just because he chose to use that one to score political points does not make it any more important than all of the other matters that they were dealing with. I want to put on the record my thanks and appreciation to all of my staff and all of the staff of Queensland Health who dealt with all of those complex matters, even in the face of grubby political attacks and attempts to politicise this pandemic. They are below even the member for Oodgeroo.