




Speech By
Brent Mickelberg

MEMBER FOR BUDERIM

Record of Proceedings, 1 December 2022

LEGAL AFFAIRS AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

 **Mr MICKELBERG** (Buderim—LNP) (3.02 pm): I rise to address the Legal Affairs and Safety Committee report No. 34 dealing with the oversight of the Office of the Information Commissioner. While the committee report is pretty generic, I would like to place on record my view of the right-to-information process in Queensland and the need for improvement, including in the Office of the Information Commissioner.

The right-to-information process in Queensland is more akin to pulling teeth with a pair of pliers than it is to openness and transparency. In my experience, it is clear that the Office of the Information Commissioner is not able to act effectively as it stands. Either by design, through chronic under-resourcing or because of a lack of desire, state government departments and the Office of the Information Commissioner preside over a system that makes the provision of information exceptionally time-consuming and complex and places an excessive weight on considerations that favour the non-release of information when the predominant consideration should be promoting good governance in the public interest.

I submitted an RTI request in April 2021—that is 19 months ago—and it still is not finalised. The request for critical information relating to the running of the Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service has hit roadblock after roadblock. It is this government's current process of delay tactics that is being used to hide crucial information from the public. By keeping these matters secret, it is preventing real change in our health system. The RTI request I submitted was prompted by approaches from doctors, nurses, health administrators and other Queensland Health staff, all of whom raised a toxic culture that existed within the Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service emanating from the then CEO, Naomi Dwyer, and the then chief operating officer, Karlyn Chettleburgh. The actions of both, it has been reported to me and as supported by Queensland Health documents I have received, were completely unacceptable and resulted in adverse patient outcomes, and some of the people who approached me spoke of the impact of their actions on them personally, including resignations from Queensland Health and even serious mental health conditions.

When whistleblowers advised me that the Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service board were made aware of these issues but had not acted decisively, I submitted an RTI request. What I have experienced in response is an attempt to delay by the health service on the Sunshine Coast. Only when faced with advice that I would be making the media aware of their failure to meet legislative requirements under the RTI Act did they manage to miraculously find the resources to deal with my request. Even then, what I received was only part of the information.

Through the process, the Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service has managed multiple times to miraculously find 'missing documents'—missing documents, I might add, that provide damning evidence of the very issues I was seeking to address. Such documents were only identified when I made it clear to them that I was already aware of some of those specific documents I had asked for and

that the fact they had not been identified until that time made it very clear that the Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service was, either deliberately or due to incompetence, not dealing with my RTI request in an appropriate manner. It hardly creates confidence. Even when those documents have been identified, I have had to fight tooth and nail to get anything released.

The response to my RTI request reeks of a cover-up by Queensland Health. The request was made after whistleblowers came to me seeking help. They made serious allegations of verbal abuse, physical abuse and harassment of medical staff and senior executives. Multiple complaints were made to the board. I find it very hard to believe that the current health minister or her predecessors were not aware of the toxic culture running through the veins of the Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service. If they did not know, perhaps that is even more concerning.

This information is critical because without accountability there can be no real change. The effect of the toxic culture created by the former CEO and the former chief operating officer has been a health service that is among the worst performing in the state. That is clear by the latest health data which was released a month late: ambulance ramping at Sunshine Coast University Hospital is at 44 per cent and elective surgery waits on the Sunshine Coast are at 43 per cent, the worst in the state.

It is clear that my RTI request has been deliberately thwarted. The only conclusion that can be reached about information being hidden in the manner it has been and RTI requests being met with obstacles and huge delays is that the state government is ashamed of what will be uncovered. This particular RTI request of mine is just one example of what is happening in government departments right across Queensland and how it is impacting the delivery of government services.

The Office of the Information Commissioner would be far more effective in helping members of the public and agencies in creating positive change if the Premier, her government, her ministers and ministerial staff would just back off and let them do their job. Queenslanders deserve an open and transparent government that governs in their interests and not in the interests of those opposite. The government should do better.