




Speech By
Lance McCallum

MEMBER FOR BUNDAMBA

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HEALTH PRACTITIONER REGULATION NATIONAL LAW AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr McCALLUM** (Bundamba—ALP) (12.16 pm): I rise to contribute to the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. On 18 February this year national health ministers agreed to amend the health practitioner regulation national law. This bill gives effect to those agreed changes.

The national scheme commenced in July 2010 with approximately half a million health practitioners registered in 10 professions. In 2022 there are approximately 825,000 health practitioners across the nation, with approximately 168,000 practising in Queensland. That is, of course, a huge amount of growth. In fact, since 2015 and the election of the Palaszczuk government our Queensland Health workforce alone has grown by 10,638 nurses, which is an increase of 38.1 per cent; 3,106 doctors, an increase of 39.2 per cent; 1,103 ambulance officers, an increase of 29.7 per cent; and 2,418 allied health professionals, an increase of 24.5 per cent. We have record numbers of frontline health workers in Queensland—the same workers who have helped us get through the pandemic so well in Queensland.

This new framework, this national law, is going to help protect the medical profession and the allied health professions that we rely on so heavily. The main objectives of this bill are to strengthen public safety and confidence in the provision of health services, improve the governance of the national scheme and enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the scheme.

The bill inserts a new paramount principle making protection of the public and public confidence in the safety of services provided by registered health practitioners and students paramount. This places an explicit legislative obligation under the national law to place protection of the public and public confidence foremost in all decisions and actions.

Here in Queensland we already have this as a paramount principle under our state based national law act. Queensland is already leading the way, as we so often do. With this amendment, Queensland's existing modification making the health and safety of the public a paramount principle will be duplicated. As such, we will amend the Queensland national law act, as the paramount principle will be enlivened through the amended national law.

The bill contains amendments to strengthen public protection and increase public confidence in health services registered under the national scheme, as well as implement reforms to improve the governance and operation of the national scheme, to help ensure the national scheme remains up to date and fit for purpose. The national scheme ensures that only health practitioners who are suitably trained and qualified to practise in a competent and ethical manner are registered. It allows health practitioners to have a single registration recognised anywhere in Australia and provides for uniform standards for the registration of health practitioners and the accreditation of health education providers.

The bill includes two reforms to strengthen the registration process that are aimed at improving protections for the public. The first empowers a national board to withdraw a practitioner's registration if the board reasonably believes the registration was improperly obtained because of the provision of

false or misleading information. This will allow for a swifter and more appropriate response to managing falsely obtained registrations. I think everybody in this place would be in agreement that that is a particularly positive and needed extra protection.

To ensure procedural fairness, the power will be subject to a show cause process and an appeal process to one of the responsible tribunals. The show cause process will not prevent a national board from taking other immediate action that is available under the national law. I do think that this responds to some of the concerns that have been raised by previous speakers on this bill. The second reform clarifies that suspended practitioners whose registration otherwise would have expired during their period of suspension must apply to renew their registration within one month of their suspension ending. That is eminently sensible.

The bill also provides for the issue of interim prohibition orders to unregistered practitioners including practitioners whose registration has lapsed or been suspended. The amendments require a show cause process to be undertaken as part of the process of issuing an interim protection order. These powers complement the existing powers of the Health Ombudsman to issue interim prohibition orders. I think that is extremely fair and balanced.

The bill will also empower the national agency and the Health Ombudsman to issue public statements about persons, including registered practitioners, who are the subject of investigations or disciplinary proceedings—which some previous speakers have raised some concerns with—and whose conduct poses a serious risk to public health and safety. That is the standard. The provisions in this bill will allow the public to be warned about the public safety risks that could be posed by these people. I can hardly imagine that anyone would oppose that. The decision to issue a public statement is also subject to a show cause process and an appeal process to a relevant tribunal. There are some very clear and strong safeguards that provide for natural justice and procedural fairness.

I was somewhat surprised to read the LNP statement of reservation. The LNP are on record as opposing these public statements. The statement of reservation reads—

We believe that no such statement should be made without a comprehensive investigation being conducted, and finalised ... If this situation were to arise, it could do untold professional, reputational, and emotional damage to the practitioner involved.

I find that to be a little bit hypocritical given that this is from the same political party that are only too happy to use health matters that are under investigation if it suits their political agenda. This is the same political party who are only too happy to inflict—and to use the words in the statement of reservation—‘untold professional, reputational and emotional damage to the practitioner involved’ by sacking hundreds of our frontline health workers the last time they were in government in Queensland.

This bill represents a significant step forward for public safety. It is a step forward for our hardworking health workers. I commend the bill to the House.