




Speech By
Hon. Yvette D'Ath

MEMBER FOR REDCLIFFE

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PUBLIC HEALTH AND OTHER LEGISLATION (COVID-19 MANAGEMENT) AMENDMENT BILL

Second Reading

 **Hon. YM D'ATH** (Redcliffe—ALP) (Minister for Health and Ambulance Services) (2.01 pm), in reply: I thank members for their contribution to the debate on the Public Health and Other Legislation (COVID-19 Management) Amendment Bill 2022. The World Health Organization has warned us not to become complacent by risking the progress we have made. To drop our guard now right at the precipice of normalising COVID-19 as part of our daily lives would be irresponsible. It would be doing a disservice to our frontline health workers who are still dealing with the cumulative impacts of this novel virus. It would be an affront to all Queenslanders who have sacrificed so much to protect the health and safety of our communities and to keep our institutions and economy functioning in the face of an unprecedented global pandemic.

COVID-19 remains unpredictable. While we think and hope the worst is behind us, this virus could continue to mutate and new waves of infection could occur. As we saw during the recent winter period, this can place pressure on our health system and, if not managed effectively, put the health of the community at risk. This bill contains sensible, proportionate and targeted measures to manage these risks for the next 12 months.

If the risks of COVID-19 remain low, these measures do not need to be used. As the Chief Health Officer explained, if we remain on our current trajectory there will be soon be limited, if any, public health restrictions still in place. However, if the risks increase, the bill will ensure the government can take the necessary steps to preserve the capacity of our health system and protect the health and safety of our community. That includes protecting the most vulnerable members of our community who are still experiencing the effects of this virus. This is not only our job; it is the right thing to do.

I now turn to the issues raised during the debate of this bill. Members opposite have repeatedly claimed there is no longer a justification for the ongoing powers in this bill. The member for Mudgeeraba suggested the measures are no longer required now that the emergency is over. Six million people have died from COVID-19 worldwide so far. This number is only ever going to go one way—up. While the risks of COVID-19 are generally plateauing over time, it is statistics like this that remind us how serious COVID can be. When I say statistics, we are talking over six million lives—loved ones, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, children, grandparents, great-grandparents.

It is easy for the opposition to stand here and claim legislative measures are no longer needed when they are not the ones responsible for managing the public health response. My priority and the priority of the Palaszczuk government has always been to preserve the health and safety of Queenslanders throughout this pandemic, even if that means having to make the hard decisions.

In one breath the opposition talks about the ongoing impact COVID-19 has had on our frontline workers and health system. In the next they suggest we do not need measures designed to prevent our health system from being overwhelmed. It is a mistake to make decisions about the ongoing response

to COVID-19 based on the low level of risk we are experiencing right now. Throughout this pandemic we have seen the trajectory of the virus change course time and time again. There are still so many unknowns that may impact the health system and the community such as the long-term and cumulative impact of repeated COVID-19 infections.

The members for Southport and Bonney suggest the better approach is to let the laws lapse and to return to parliament should new emergency laws be needed. A number of members on the other side have said this. We have heard how easy it would be to recall parliament in an emergency. It is an interesting point to make given that the Palaszczuk government implemented this exact measure in early 2020. The opposition criticised government for progressing urgent emergency legislation. If we can prevent the need for urgent emergency legislation, why wouldn't we? It would be irresponsible and inappropriate to wait until we find ourselves without sufficient powers in an emergency situation. We have to learn from the past 2½ years.

Even urgent legislation takes time, crucial time that would put lives and our health system at risk unnecessarily. Rather than waiting for an emergency to arise, the responsible approach is to insert a temporary, targeted framework to enable the Chief Health Officer to respond rapidly if the situation changes and protective measures are needed. Interestingly, I have not heard anyone from the opposition referring to other jurisdictions. Do they think Queensland is going it alone? What are the other jurisdictions doing? In fact, all mainland states have a pandemic management framework in place. Some have temporary and transitional provisions such as we are proposing here. Some have permanently embedded the powers into statute going forward. Some have given those powers to the minister of the day and not the health officer. Some have given it to their health officials, but they have made it permanent. We believe that the appropriate course is transitional provisions for the next 12 months.

The member for Bonney claims people know how to self-manage the virus without government intervention. It is easy to look at COVID-19 through the lens of our own experiences and to overlook the experiences of others. For many Queenslanders COVID-19 does not pose a significant threat, but this is not the case for all Queenslanders.

Mr O'Connor interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Martin): Order! Member for Bonney.

Mrs D'ATH: I take that interjection now that the member for Bonney is in his seat. The Chief Health Officer also gave evidence to this committee that it is important to have these powers.

Mrs Frecklington interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The members for Nanango and Bonney!

Mrs D'ATH: For many Queenslanders COVID-19 does not pose a significant risk, but this is not the case for all Queenslanders. Some have suffered greatly from the virus and others with immunosuppress systems continue to live in fear given the serious consequences that may follow if they contract COVID-19. I wonder if those opposite have met with any disability groups, because I know they feel very strongly about this. If risks remain low, the opposition will get their wish. The measures in the bill will not be activated and people will continue to adapt their lives to self-manage COVID-19. We all hope that is the case; we really do.

However, as I said in my second reading speech, the bill is not only about people's individual capacity to manage the risks of COVID-19; it is also about making sure we retain the ability to mitigate impacts on the health system during waves of COVID-19 infection. The bill provides the safety net we need to support our community and protect our health system over the next 12 months.

Several members suggested the power to make directions should be exercised by an elected representative—not the Chief Health Officer. The ability for the Chief Health Officer to issue public health directions has served Queenslanders well. The Chief Health Officer makes decisions based on the best medical information available at the time. He considers and gives relative weight to: epidemiological information, the capacity of the hospital and health system, the latest evidence from across the world about the course of the virus and available treatments and community behaviour.

He makes those decisions in an environment where new information is constantly coming to light. Queensland's successful response to COVID-19 is in large part thanks to the leadership of our Chief Health Officer. I want to acknowledge both our current Chief Health Officer and our former Chief Health Officer, who have done an incredible job. The people of Queensland had confidence in Her Excellency Dr Jeannette Young and now Dr John Gerrard when they stood up almost daily to give briefings around COVID-19. As I have already outlined, the bill inserts a range of checks and balances over the Chief Health Officer's decision-making to enhance accountability.

We would all prefer not to need measures to respond to COVID-19. Hopefully the risks will stay low and we will not need to activate any of the protective measures in the bill over the next 12 months, but that is not guaranteed. We cannot simply ignore the risks of COVID and expect the virus to be managed without a controlled scaling down of measures. In fact, the budget announced last night gave a further extension to the end of the year for COVID payments to support the health system across states and territories, acknowledging it is not over yet.

I would like to take this opportunity once again to thank Dr Gerrard for his exceptional work leading Queensland's public health response as the state's Chief Health Officer. As I say, I thank the former chief health officer, our deputy Chief Health Officers and all of our health workers and the private sector who stepped up, including our medical students and nursing students. It was an extraordinary effort for them in everything they did with testing, vaccination and support in our hospitals in both the public and private systems. I call on all members to support this bill. This bill is not about party lines; it is about safety in the community in the face of a health threat. Preserving our world-class health system and protecting our most vulnerable is everyone's responsibility. I commend the bill to the House.