




Speech By
Joseph Kelly

MEMBER FOR GREENSLOPES

Record of Proceedings, 11 September 2024

MOTION

COVID 19, Response Review

 **Mr KELLY** (Greenslopes—ALP) (4.45 pm): I would argue that the healthcare system does that at all times—operates in an ethical way, prioritises individuals and treats people with compassion—and has done for the entire time I have been involved in health care, which is since the 1980s.

I certainly support the government's amendment to the motion and oppose the member for Noosa's motion. I understand the intent of the member's motion and would generally support it, but I would argue that this work has already been done and is ongoing. We have systems in health care of constantly reviewing and improving practice as we move forward.

The reality is that we have a very good understanding of how to respond to a pandemic and plans around what to do if we need to. We have been dealing with pandemics for a long time in health care—long before the invention of vaccinations—so we have a good understanding of them. To execute these plans we need well-trained staff working in population and preventive health roles. Dr Jeannette Young, as the then chief health officer, had long prepared for a pandemic, ensuring the plans and staffing were in place. She had been doing this since she became chief health officer in about 2006.

It is somewhat ironic that we are debating this motion on the 10th anniversary of the Newman government cuts to the Public Service, including many health workers. Sadly, in the period 2012 to 2014, the very sections of the Queensland Health workforce that Dr Jeannette Young put in place to respond to pandemics were absolutely decimated by the Newman government job cuts. I shudder to think what the outcome would have been if the LNP had been in power throughout the pandemic. The results would have been vastly different.

Members of the LNP called for the borders to be opened 62 times—in direct contravention of the health advice. This was done with supposedly a health professional on their side. We are shocked that those opposite did not want to follow the advice of the former chief health officer. We should not be shocked. The member for Kawana was initially calling COVID a hoax, and then hopped on Twitter to dismiss her health advice. The member for Broadwater said that our now Governor was a power hungry, punch-drunk bureaucrat. Not only that, he said that the government's response was tantamount to putting a doona over your head and sucking your thumb.

Ms Pease interjected.

Mr KELLY: Yes, the member for Currumbin was helping people to break the law. Let us not forget the fake union that the member for Mudgeeraba is a member of that came out swinging against vaccines and supporting a number of anti-vaccination rallies.

Fortunately, Dr Young and the then health minister prioritised rebuilding capacity and, thankfully, they did just that. It certainly put us in a position to respond quickly and effectively: firstly, with measures to protect people in the absence of a vaccine; and, secondly, with rolling out the vaccines efficiently and safely. It will be one of my proudest achievements as a nurse to have played a small role in helping with the vaccine rollout.

Of course, we can always improve practice in any area of health care, but I would argue that this work is continuous and the lessons from COVID are being incorporated into practice. We know our government's strong, swift and coordinated health response protected the people of Queensland throughout the pandemic. We repeatedly led by example in demonstrating effective control of community transmission. While many of the public health measures were difficult—including the staff vaccination mandate—Queensland was rewarded with one of the lowest mortality rates in the world.

I want to finish with mortality rates. Sadly, this review, like many reviews, does not seem to focus on the need to keep health workers safe. Health workers kept showing up to work in the absence of a vaccine and they died. Let us take a moment to reflect on that and remember the hundreds of thousands of health workers who died as a result of caring for people with COVID-19—the majority of these before the introduction of an effective and safe vaccine.

Every time someone wants to have a discussion with me about vaccines and oppose them, I think about those 220,000 nurses around the world who died in 2020 and 2021 before the introduction of vaccines. I wonder what they would say to those people who refuse to have vaccines? I wonder what their families would say? These were mothers, grandmothers, uncles, brothers and 22-year-olds at the start of their nursing career. They are the people who died. Of course, there were doctors, allied health professionals, wardies, receptionists, security guards, cooks, pharmacists, pathology staff and lots of other workers who died.

I challenge anyone to name any other class of worker that has faced such an occupational death toll outside of warfare. I pay tribute to all of those health workers who continued to go to work in the absence of a vaccine. It was scary for those of us who had family in that situation. Sadly, it seems that this death toll has gone unnoticed. I have worked with the QNMU, the Australian Workers' Union, the United Workers Union and the Australian Medical Association. We have established an incorporated association that is working to establish memorials for those health workers who died as a result of trying to save other people's lives. I certainly support the government's amendment.