




Speech By
Hon. Shannon Fentiman

MEMBER FOR WATERFORD

Record of Proceedings, 19 March 2024

PHARMACY BUSINESS OWNERSHIP BILL

 **Hon. SM FENTIMAN** (Waterford—ALP) (Minister for Health, Mental Health and Ambulance Services and Minister for Women) (5.35 pm), in reply: I thank members for their contributions to the debate on the Pharmacy Business Ownership Bill 2023. In particular, I thank the members who have acknowledged the incredible contribution made by community pharmacies across Queensland. It is clear that community pharmacies are an essential component of Queensland's healthcare environment. It is crucial that we support them now and into the future. One owner told the committee—

We are a family rural pharmacy where we live and work within the community. We have "skin in the game" and we do whatever it takes to look after our community. We are the most accessible health destination in town. Our patients know when they or a family member have a health problem, they feel comfortable to come into our pharmacy and get immediate access to a pharmacist ...

These interactions occur between Queenslanders and their pharmacist thousands of times each day and go a long way to protect the health and happiness of all Queenslanders. The system works and our patients are grateful for it.

I could not say it better myself. This bill ensures that our current and future pharmacy business owners can continue to provide high-quality, affordable health care wherever they live.

The bill significantly modernises the framework for regulating pharmacy business ownership and addresses deficiencies within the current act. I note the member for Maiwar's comments that the current ownership restrictions have not been enough to protect the community pharmacy model. The current act simply does not contain the necessary powers for Queensland Health to effectively regulate pharmacy business ownership. Through the new licensing framework, this bill will ensure the council as the regulator can actively review ownership arrangements each year. It provides the council with the necessary powers to enforce the ownership requirements, including the power to request information or documents necessary to determine who owns or has an interest in a pharmacy business. It also makes it an offence for a third party to exercise improper control over a pharmacy business. This is an Australian first aimed at ensuring our pharmacy owners can act autonomously.

Importantly, this bill prevents the newly formed council from approving a licence for a pharmacy business that is located in or directly accessible from a supermarket. This provision brings Queensland into line with the rest of country and it recognises, as members have noted today, that supermarkets are simply not an environment conducive to supporting the very often personal health needs of our community members.

We know that community pharmacies are the heart of many regional and rural communities. In these communities there are often few other health professionals and the role of the local pharmacist extends far beyond dispensing medications. Pharmacists in these communities understand local issues and build trust with patients, often over many years. The local pharmacy is truly part of community life. During the 2018 parliamentary inquiry into pharmacy ownership, many stakeholders expressed concerns that relaxation of the ownership restrictions would result in large corporate entities

concentrating their services in regional centres. They noted that this could result in the closure of smaller pharmacy businesses in surrounding rural and remote areas, leading to reduced access to pharmacy services in those communities.

The Pharmacy Guild of Australia told the 2018 committee that the ownership restrictions ensure a decentralised and diverse ownership structure which is essential to providing access to Queenslanders wherever they are throughout the state. I thank the former parliamentary committee for their great work during that inquiry. The Miles government is committed to ensuring that the community pharmacy model is sustainable now and into the future. The bill will help to ensure local pharmacies can continue to thrive and support the health and wellbeing of our rural and remote communities.

Many members have noted that some time has passed since the 2018 parliamentary committee's report. I want to assure members that we have taken the time to work with stakeholders to ensure that we have this right. I say that good things come to those who wait. It is a complex and detailed bill that establishes an entirely new regulatory scheme for the pharmacy industry. Unlike those opposite, our government will never rush decisions that affect the health care of Queenslanders. We needed to get this right.

Queensland Health undertook extensive consultation, receiving almost 800 pieces of feedback, all of which were carefully considered to inform the final bill. This time was well spent, as we have before us a robust, modern and comprehensive bill which will ensure our community pharmacies can continue to focus on what they do best—and that is looking after our communities.

I note that during the committee process some stakeholders did not support the premise of the bill that pharmacy businesses should be primarily owned by pharmacists. While I acknowledge the views of those stakeholders, the Miles government is committed to supporting the community pharmacy model. Ownership restrictions are common to all Australian jurisdictions and aim to ensure that pharmacy businesses are operated in a manner that places the health and wellbeing of customers and the community ahead of commercial considerations. Whilst I acknowledge there are varying reports and evidence relating to pharmacy business ownership restrictions, I want to make it clear that our government is committed to protecting and promoting the community pharmacy model.

I again thank the Cost of Living and Economics Committee for their detailed examination of the bill. My thanks also go to the staff of the committee. I also thank the hardworking members of the legislative policy unit within Queensland Health, especially Kirsten Law and Karson Mahler. I want to thank you for all of your work on this bill over many months and years. I also want to acknowledge the many stakeholders who have contributed to the development of this legislation including the Pharmacy Guild of Australia. I acknowledge the many pharmacists in the gallery today. This bill demonstrates the Miles government's commitment to the community pharmacy model which we know is essential for our healthcare system.

As the committee heard from one stakeholder, 'Pharmacy ownership by pharmacists is the very cornerstone on which the fabric of community pharmacy in Australia is built.' Well I agree. I commend the bill to the House.