



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Queensland Hospitals

SPEECH

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Speaker Boyce, Sen Sue

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Senator BOYCE (Queensland) (12.59 pm)—I would like to speak during this time on a situation that is a real scandal—not a confected scandal about an individual using his own funds to support a political party, unlike the forced contributions of unionists all over Australia, particularly those made to the failing Bligh government—the state of the hospital system in Queensland. There is no longer any confidence in or support for not only the hospital system but also the minister who administers it—not even from his leader, the Premier. How many times does Mr Rudd have to be told that the Queensland hospital system is in a disastrous mess? It has been since the last election, when Premier Beattie promised, hand on heart and smile on lips—as usual—to fix it and completely failed. It has gone on and on.

In October 2007, Mr Rudd said that if he won the federal election the buck for fixing Queensland's hospital system would stop with him. I am here to tell Mr Rudd that the buck has well and truly stopped. The Queensland system is near collapse. Yesterday, Dr Chris Davis from the Australian Medical Association of Queensland described the Queensland hospital system as very bloated, very rigid and very politicised. The report that the AMAQ issued at the same time said that most of Queensland's hospitals were under pressure, despite the record health budget that has been spent—mainly on public servants in the health sector, not on fixing the hospitals.

Yesterday's report talked about the worst hospitals in Queensland for bed occupancy rates. The Caloundra hospital was at No. 1, with a bed occupancy rate of 119.8 per cent. The desirable rate is 85 per cent—that is considered a safe occupancy rate. No. 2 was Cairns Base Hospital, with an occupancy rate of 101.5 per cent. Mackay Base Hospital was No. 3, with an occupancy rate of 101.3. Nambour, Logan, Caboolture and Redland hospitals all had unacceptably high occupancy rates.

At the same time, this report from the AMAQ pointed out that Townsville, Cairns and Nambour hospitals had unacceptable waiting times for elective surgery. When looking at long wait lists, keep in mind that that means people who have probably waited more than 90 days for the opportunity to have surgery. That is the list from yesterday. But things move on in Queensland in the hospital system very quickly. Just today the AMA has again, in response to problems

raised by its members and by poor old benighted health consumers in Queensland, called for an urgent upgrade to the Rockhampton hospital. Let us put that one on the list today.

Some of the issues that were raised on talkback radio in Queensland today would make your hair stand on end—if we were not already so inured to horror, mishandling, rigidity, bureaucracy, red tape and total failure to help the people that the hospital system is supposed to be there for, the patients. In Rockhampton hospital, a man with a brain tumour was told that he will have to wait a minimum of 24 months to get an MRI to find out if that tumour is benign or aggressive. This gentleman from Rockhampton—

Senator Mason—24 months?

Senator BOYCE—Twenty-four months, Senator Mason. This man, who has a brain tumour, will need to wait if he wants to use the wonderful and caring services of the Queensland hospital system at the Rockhampton hospital. This man told talkback radio in Brisbane this morning that he had sold his ute so that he could go private to find out now, not in 24 months, whether the brain tumour he has is benign or aggressive.

Perhaps one of the best stories that illustrates the problems outlined in AMAQ's report on hospitals is from the person who rang up today to tell the Queensland public that the Princess Alexandra Hospital is very helpfully sending a specialist urologist to the Rockhampton hospital because they do not have any; they cannot do any work in the urology area in Rockhampton. So the PA Hospital in Brisbane, one of our largest and most efficient hospitals in a system that is by no means efficient, is sending a urologist up there so that Rockhampton people do not have to come to Brisbane to see a urologist. The only problem is that Rockhampton hospital and PA Hospital did not communicate on this, so there are patients from Rockhampton coming to see a urologist and a urologist who has gone from Brisbane to Rockhampton to see the patients who are in Brisbane. That mess would be humorous, funny, except that it is so much a part of the disaster that is the Queensland hospital system.

I noticed another report that came out today. It was from the Business Council of Australia. It said,

‘There is no leadership in the current health system’—they mean in Australia—‘because the state and the Commonwealth aren’t working together.’ How much more needs to be said to prove to Mr Rudd that the buck has now stopped with him? We certainly cannot trust what happens in the Queensland system.

If we look at it overall, medical errors in Australia cost \$2 billion a year and one-third of the current treatments that Australians receive in their hospitals are not based on the latest research. Of course, none of this would be surprising in any way to Queensland patients, because Queensland had the worst record of all in the last Productivity Commission report on deaths caused by medical errors. The Productivity Commission report in 2009 showed that 49 people in Queensland were mistakenly killed or seriously injured in Queensland hospitals in 2006-07, and that was the highest number of any state across the country. In case Senator Feeney and others need reminding, Queensland has the third highest population. We outdid the two most populous states in killing and maiming our citizens in our hospitals.

The problems for Queensland go on and on. This is not new. Everyone would be aware of the current court case regarding Dr Jayant Patel. One of the errors that came out there was that no-one had checked his qualifications to practise medicine—a bureaucratic bungle. His practice is linked to at least 87 deaths of people treated at the Bundaberg Hospital between 2003 and 2005. Evidence before the trial has suggested that medical records were altered to hide mistakes that were made.

Of course this is nothing new in the Queensland hospital system. Cover-up after cover-up is the way the system works. Dr Sylvia Andrew-Starkey, who is the head of the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine, in August last year said that there had been several deaths attributable to the waiting times that patients had outside major Brisbane and regional hospitals. Some of those who made it inside were found lying on trolleys lined up along corridors. Doctors commented that some elderly people had no choice but to sit in plastic chairs overnight while waiting for a bed or waiting for treatment. The Townsville Hospital’s emergency people said that they had often had to open up conference rooms to accommodate patients. But the benighted health minister, Mr Stephen Robertson—at that stage the man who had the confidence of Queensland’s Premier—said that he did not have any evidence that people were dying, that he would like some evidence about people dying before he acted. The fact that the head of the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine told him the lengthy waiting lists and hospitals on bypass existed was apparently not

enough Mr Robertson; he wanted to see the bodies before he could do something about it.

Of course that was back when Mr Robertson had the confidence of his Premier. At long last, he does not. Of course he blames everybody but himself for that: it was the fault of the middle managers, it was the fault of everybody else, that for more than 12 months nurses in remote areas of Queensland lived in unsafe housing. Mr Robertson had tried the Peter Beattie trick of, hand on heart, saying, ‘Whoops, I’m sorry; I’ll fix it straight away.’ The only problem was that he did not do a good enough job of hiding the fact that he did nothing and that he did not fix it straight away. In the end, Premier Bligh was forced to act on his mismanagement. After the promise of the last election, Ms Bligh said about the man who was supposed to fix Queensland’s hospital system:

It is completely unacceptable that this work has taken such a long period of time to bring to this standard and I’ve made this absolutely clear to both the Minister and the director-general.

If we want to talk about scandals in Queensland, let us talk about the scandalous way the government is behaving. That is a genuine scandal, a real scandal. Right now there are 34,000 Queenslanders waiting for elective surgery, and they wait and they wait while Mr Rudd tries to work out when and if the buck will ever stop with him. There are several groups and inquiries already looking at this, but he promised in October 2007 to fix the problems in the Queensland hospital system. He said that the buck stopped with him.

Senator Mason—He did!

Senator BOYCE—He did; he said it over and over. He even suggested that he had finished the blame game. The best way to finish the blame game in Queensland is to finish the government of Premier Bligh, the inept Labor government of Queensland. We could solve many of the problems of Queensland by getting rid of the government that has not ‘just’ discovered that it has problems in the hospital system but known for well over three years that the hospital system is in crisis. Part of the reason that it is in crisis is their inability to do anything other than throw more bureaucrats at the system and their inability to change the culture of cover-up. In fact, in many ways, they have encouraged the further development of a culture of cover-up that has gone on and on. So, Mr Rudd, pay attention: Queensland’s hospital system has failed, Ms Bligh has completely failed and, if you are serious about fixing hospitals in Queensland, you should have started

yesterday so that the citizens of Cairns, Townsville, Mackay, Rockhampton—

Senator Mason—Bundaberg!

Senator BOYCE—Bundaberg—there is almost not a city without a hospital on this list. As I said, regional areas such as Mount Isa are also seriously compromised by the inefficiencies, the failings and the real scandal of the way the Bligh government in Queensland has failed to provide a decent hospital system.