



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**NATIONAL HEALTH AMENDMENT**  
**(IMMUNISATION) BILL 2006**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 6 September 2006**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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| <b>Questioner</b>                       | <b>Responder</b>    |
| <b>Speaker</b> O'CONNOR, Brendan, MP    | <b>Question No.</b> |

**Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR** (Gorton) (11.55 am)—I rise to make some comments on the National Health Amendment (Immunisation) Bill 2006 and also to support the amendment moved by the shadow minister for health. I heard the Chief Government Whip comment on the record of the Howard government in relation to vaccination. I understand it is the obligation of a chief government whip to do all things in this place to provide the government some cover, as he did in that speech. Indeed, his own attendance and his wanting to get on to the speakers list shows that he is aware—as you would expect other government members would be aware—that the government are failing to turn up and speak on very important matters, including the National Health Amendment—

*Ms George interjecting—*

**Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR**—The member for Throsby is also well aware of this. The fact is that this is the closest the government has got to approaching the number of opposition speakers on a particular bill for some time. It is still half the number of speakers that the opposition has listed to talk on this matter.

**Mr Bevis**—Put them on performance pay!

**Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR**—The shadow minister for homeland security, who is at the table, knows this only too well. In debating his amendments to a previous bill, last night 13 opposition members spoke on the bill and you, Mr Deputy Speaker Somlyay, were the only contributor for the government. Again, it does not surprise me to see the Chief Government Whip in here trying to add a few numbers, because clearly the entire government is on rostered days off with respect to this chamber when it comes to debating public policy.

This bill is under consideration, of course, after sloppy drafting of the National Health Amendment (Immunisation Program) Act 2005 disallowed the provisions of goods and services associated with the provision or administration of designated vaccines. The amendments made by the immunisation act were enacted to change the way in which vaccines were listed on the National Immunisation Program, as announced in the 2005-06 budget.

The effect of the principal amendment in this bill will be to allow the minister to make arrangements to provide goods and services other than vaccines which are essential for the provision of designated vaccines. Labor supported the original bill but with a strong second reading amendment, as you may recall, Mr Deputy Speaker, highlighting the concerns about the government's vaccine policy. I think it is fair to say that, with the advantage of hindsight, Labor has been proven absolutely correct—there has been a failure by government to attend to the needs in this important health area.

That bill expanded the role of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee to include evaluating the cost-effectiveness of new vaccines for funding under the National Immunisation Program, a role previously performed by the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation. This was not opposed by any of the stakeholders. Labor contended that this action was taken to downgrade the role of the ATAGI as punishment for the advice that vaccines such as pneumococcal, oral polio and chickenpox should be funded. This opinion was widely supported by public commentators and authorities in the area.

Indeed, it was the first time in Australian history that the government refused to find money to fund the vaccine recommended by its own Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation. The headline in the *Courier-Mail* said it all, as you might recall: 'Children are dying but Howard refuses to help'. Pneumococcal disease is the most common bacterial cause of serious disease in Australian children, so the decision not to fund the vaccine was a complete abrogation of responsibility by the Howard government, made even more obscene since this was the year the Treasurer had bragged of record tax cuts but, indeed, the government had placed children at risk of debilitating disease, brain injury, deafness and death.

This was yet another example of the Howard government spitefully punishing the public bodies whose advice it finds embarrassing or politically inconvenient. We have seen this government blaming statutory authorities and other bodies rather than taking the responsibility for its own decisions. We have seen it blame its public servants and others where it finds the truth too embarrassing to admit its fault. Again, in this area we have seen an independent body punished for providing advice contrary to the intentions of the government. In this case the decision was critical. The loser was children's health.

As Labor has repeatedly pointed out, the Howard government has a shameful record of inaction on the funding of vaccines for Australian children. This has been mentioned before by a number of members, but I want to repeat it for the record. We heard from the Chief Government Whip how proud he was of how well the government is doing in this area. I remind the House that in September 2002 the government's own technical advisory group recommended that the government fully fund the pneumococcal, chickenpox and injectable polio vaccines, yet it refused. In September 2003 the National Health and Medical Research Council made the same recommendation. The Howard government considered this recommendation in the lead-up to May 2004 and again did nothing. After Labor announced it would fully fund these vaccines, two days after the May 2004 budget, the minister for health was shamed into announcing funding for pneumococcal vaccine. However, only two years of funding was announced. Nobody knows what will happen when the funding runs out in this important area of children's health.

The minister for health refused to fund the chickenpox and injectable polio vaccines as Labor continued to campaign for full funding for the vaccines and again, the Howard government and the minister for health did nothing. Finally, the minister for health matched Labor's plan to fund these vaccines in March 2005. In doing so, he conceded that chickenpox had killed at least 19 Australians and hospitalised 3,300 people in the last two-year period alone—and unnecessarily so, we would contend. So we do not want to hear the glib remarks by the Chief Government Whip about the record of the Howard government on vaccines. Clearly it is a record of neglect and contempt—contempt for the advisory bodies that recommended vaccination in these areas in the first place and contempt for the children of this nation, who of course are not in the position to advance their own interests.

In this area of health we should be doing everything as a parliament—and indeed the government should be doing everything—to protect our children from the threat of disease, but the record speaks for itself. It is a record of neglect and contempt, with little regard for the concerns raised by the families who have lobbied the government and the independent bodies that have advised the government. Whilst this bill is a rather technical bill, intended to amend the sloppy legislation that was put together by government last year, the second reading amendment moved by the shadow minister for health should be taken seriously by the government because there is no room for playing politics with children's health. I finish by reminding the House of some of the concerns raised by the shadow minister for health in her second reading amendment to this bill. The amendment states that, whilst not declining to give the bill a second reading:

... the House expresses its concern that the Government has:

- (1) consistently ignored the expert advice of the Australian Therapeutic Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) with respect to the inclusion of pneumococcal, oral polio and chicken pox vaccines on the National Immunisation Program;
- (2) failed to provide the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee (PBAC) with the needed expertise in immunisation as required; and
- (3) failed to provide adequate ongoing funding for essential vaccines over the forward estimates of the 2006-07 Budget, leaving the Government's long-term commitment to the National Immunisation Program in doubt.