



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Main Committee**

**HEALTH WORKFORCE  
AUSTRALIA BILL 2009**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 26 May 2009**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Page** 4375  
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**Speaker** Georganas, Steve, MP

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**Mr GEORGANAS** (Hindmarsh) (5.17 pm)—I too rise to speak today on the Health Workforce Australia Bill 2009. This bill establishes Health Workforce Australia, a national health workforce authority. It forms part of the package agreed to by the Council of Australian Governments in November 2008. Health Workforce Australia will be responsible for implementing the majority of initiatives under the COAG workforce package, which I will detail and outline shortly.

I represent one of the oldest electorates in the country and, as chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing, I have a very keen interest in health issues. I believe that Australia's health system is one of the best in the world. This is mainly due to our highly competent professional health workforce—our nurses, doctors, allied health professionals and researchers—who are among the best qualified and most professional in the world.

When I was on the last parliamentary health and ageing committee inquiry into public hospitals, we saw figures that showed that \$1 billion was slashed from public hospitals under the previous government. We had a decade of neglect. But this government is stepping up to the mark and is determined to deliver dramatic improvements in health care. *The state of our public hospitals: June 2008 report* was based on figures from when the previous government was in power. I will read out some of those figures. In 2006-07, public hospital admissions increased by around three per cent. That is more than twice the rate of population growth. When did this happen? In 2006-07. Who was in government then? The Howard government.

Again in 2006-07, there were 6.7 million presentations to emergency departments. That is equivalent to a third of Australia's population. When did this happen? It happened under the former government. Yet at that period of time when we asked questions all that we heard was the blame game. All we heard from the other side during question time when these questions were raised by us when we were in opposition was, 'Blame the states.' The number of patients presenting to emergency departments between 1998-99 and 2006-07 increased by over 34 per cent. Three in 10 emergency department patients were not seen within the recommended time. This all happened under the watch of the former Howard coalition government.

At the same time, we were suffering chronic shortages and underinvestment in the health workforce. The end result of this neglect by the previous government is that there are now chronic shortages in general practice, various medical specialties, dentistry, nursing and certain allied health professions. The ageing of the population will also have significant implications on the demand for health resources and the healthcare workforce. That is why we need action now.

This government has stepped up to the plate and is working collaboratively with the state governments on solutions. The government is investing in the whole health system across the whole country to deliver better health outcomes for all Australians. Despite the major challenges caused by the global recession, health and ageing remains one of the top priorities for the Rudd Labor government.

We saw this the other night in the recent budget, which delivered the landmark amount of \$64 billion to the healthcare agreement with the states and territories. That will provide record levels of funding for public hospitals and reduce pressure on emergency departments. It provided a \$1.3 billion Health and Hospitals Fund and investment in cancer infrastructure as part of a \$2 billion package focused on tackling the wide disparity in cancer treatment outcomes for cancer patients in rural and regional areas. It also provides a \$1.5 billion investment to upgrade hospitals and clinical training infrastructure across Australia and invested \$430.3 million in state-of-the-art research and clinical training facilities.

It also provided more funding for training doctors, including a 35 per cent increase in GP training places. That is significant growth. It also provided funding for growing the nursing workforce, including through enhancing the role of the highly skilled nurse practitioner workforce. These reforms help tackle the health workforce shortages, which are the legacy of the inaction of the previous government. The budget also provided more funding for

provision of health services in rural areas to address severe health workforce shortages, which again the previous government neglected over its 11 years in office.

In November 2008 the Council of Australian Governments signed off on the historic \$1.6 billion health workforce package. This package forms part of the National Partnership Agreement on Hospital and Health Workforce Reform. This was signed by all states and territories in March 2009. The package, comprising approximately \$1.1 billion of Commonwealth funding and \$539.2 million from states and territories, is the single largest investment in the health workforce ever made by Australian governments. This investment will improve health workforce capacity, efficiency and productivity. It will do this by improving clinical training arrangements, increasing postgraduate training places for medical graduates, improving health workforce planning across Australia and enhancing training infrastructure, particularly, I stress again, in regional and rural areas.

A significant part of the COAG package is the establishment of a national health workforce authority—or Health Workforce Australia, as it will be known—to produce more effective, streamlined and integrated clinical training arrangements and to support workforce planning and policy. The Health Workforce Australia Bill 2009 establishes Health Workforce Australia and implements a majority of the COAG health workforce initiatives. The bill specifies the functions, government and structure of Health Workforce Australia. It enables the health ministers to provide directions to Health Workforce Australia and it requires Health Workforce Australia to report to the health ministers. Health Workforce Australia will be responsible for: funding, planning and coordinating undergraduate clinical training across all health disciplines; supporting clinical training supervision; supporting health workforce research and planning, including through a national workforce planning statistical resource; funding simulation training; and providing advice to health ministers on relevant national workforce issues. The authority will also ensure best value for money for these workforce initiatives and a more rapid and substantive progression of the necessary policy and planning activities.

HWA, or Health Workforce Australia, is to commence management of undergraduate clinical training from 1 January next year. This bill is required to establish Health Workforce Australia by July 2009 to ensure that it is operational within the time frames agreed to in the COAG national partnership agreement. The COAG health workforce package is a major investment in making the necessary and much-needed improvements to the health workforce through effective planning and policy development. It will work with and across jurisdictions and with the education and health sectors, and it is pivotal for the success of the COAG package. For the first time, there will be one single body responsible for the delivery, funding, planning and oversight of all clinical training in this country. This is the creation of a new single body which can operate across both the health and the education sectors and which will have responsibility in health. It is critical to devising national solutions that effectively integrate workforce planning and policy.

I am proud to say that the Rudd Labor government is committed to addressing the chronic shortages which are affecting our health system and is providing support to the dedicated and hardworking professionals that are the backbone of our health system. I am pleased today to be able to support the Health Workforce Australia Bill 2009.