



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Main Committee**

**PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS**

**Mental Health**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 25 October 2010**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Dutton, Peter, MP

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**Question No.**

**Mr DUTTON** (Dickson) (7.47 pm)—I would like to start by acknowledging the contributions of each of the members from both sides on what is an incredibly important motion. In particular I would like to thank very much the member for Boothby, who commenced the debate in my absence due to commitments in the other chamber. I also thank the member for Pearce, who has had a long-abiding interest in this area and in health issues generally. She did great credit to herself in her contribution tonight as well.

During the recent election campaign the case was compelling to act and to act decisively when it came to the issue of mental health. Much debate had taken place across a long period of time right around the country about the need for hospital reform and the way in which we deliver health services needing to be dragged into the 21st century. There had been failings at a state government level right around the country for a generation in the way in which different health services were proposed and implemented. Something had to give way.

The then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, had made a promise in relation to hospitals and the delivery of health services at the 2007 election. Expectation was incredibly high during the course of the last three years about how it was that the government was going to implement this change, not just in relation to hospitals and the management of hospitals but, importantly, in relation to the delivery of primary health care as well. Of course, people were bitterly disappointed—quite astounded and dumbfounded—at the lack of response when it came to the incredibly important issue of mental health. The fact that the government had provided responses to the Christine Bennett report and yet had not at any stage attempted to make a comprehensive response to mental health meant that they were condemned by many.

As we spoke to people right across the country in the lead up to the campaign, and also over the course of the entire last three years, people—particularly the health experts—were particularly disappointed at the government's ultimate response that this was something they were going to deal with in their second term of government. Every expert had been led to believe that this was a No. 1 priority for the government. The promotion of Pat McGorry to Australian of the Year only ramped up that expectation and, of course, people became bitterly disappointed when this government did not act on mental health.

So, whilst I welcome this motion and debate, I am disappointed about the government's response—not just during the election campaign but since. I know that the government will say to the Independents and to health experts around the country at the moment: 'Just wait. Just wait and see what this government does, because we're promising to do a lot in relation to mental health.' They will say to the Independents, probably tonight, 'This motion is not worthy of support because the Gillard government is on the cusp of putting money into mental health.' My message to them and to the experts who have had so much to contribute in this space is that that is the same empty rhetoric that they were provided with in the last three years by the Rudd-Gillard government.

This coalition grasped the issue of mental health, and we put it squarely on the agenda during the last election campaign. People expected the coalition to retreat on the issue of health and we did the opposite. We took the fight up to the government on what we thought was a failed plan in relation to their hospitals proposal, which only dramatically increased the number of bureaucrats in the system and which has been at the heart of dysfunction and the reason for failure at a state level over the course of the last 10 or 15 years. We embraced much of what the experts had to say because we did not believe that mental health was an area where we needed another inquiry. We did not believe that mental health was an area that needed to be put off until tomorrow. We believe that the government needs to have action in place immediately. It is completely without credibility that the government would argue that they could put in place proper reform in the health space without providing a direct and important response to mental health.

Much of the debate has been about the stress on emergency departments and that families are going through. Of course, we are all shaped by our own life experiences, but I can remember in a previous life—many years ago, as a police officer—fronting families who had had suicide attempts by children in the family, accompanying ambulances with some of those people to emergency departments and parents who were grieving and in a

complete state of shock and despair when a message had to be delivered that their young child, male or female, had taken their life. That is a burden that no family, no parent, should ever have to incur. What we had hoped, by putting this issue front and centre, was that we could relieve some of that pressure, that we could take away the angst and the pressure that families face, that we could take away the inappropriate care being offered at emergency departments at two or three o'clock in the morning when people present with suicide attempts, because not only is the expertise not available but the whole-of-care that that patient requires is not available. That of course puts extra pressure and stresses not just on the emergency department workers but the doctors and nurses trying to deal with other cases that present during emergency hours. What we put forward was something that we had consulted quite widely about, and we had a comprehensive plan that was endorsed by many prominent Australians in this space. We proposed during the election campaign that the number of headspace centres go to a minimum of 90 nationally, and the establishment of 20 EPPIC centres, early psychosis prevention and intervention centres, that would have on average 20 acute and 20 subacute beds at each of those centres—an additional 800 beds nationwide. When we said that we wanted appropriate funds to put some of these services into place, this was received with great acclamation from many people, including Pat McGorry, John Mendoza, Ian Hickie and others.

It is important to recognise what some experts had to say. They were dismissed by the government; they were embraced by us. David Crosbie, who is the CEO of the Mental Health Council of Australia, is soon to step down. He is a distinguished Australian who has made an extraordinary contribution, and he said:

Mental health is a part of the final COAG health reform agreement. ... The commitment of the Federal Government to become a major player in community mental health is restated in the agreement, but it is not enacted.

Professor Ian Hickie, again, is a leading Australian, a world expert and a person of whom Australians should be proud. He is from the Brain and Mind Institute, and he said in relation to the coalition's commitment:

This is exactly the size and the scale and the focus that we've been looking for and it is what the Australian government can actually do.

John Mendoza, who was the chair of the Prime Minister's mental health advisory council—appointed personally by Kevin Rudd—resigned in disgust at the inaction of the Rudd-Gillard government in relation to mental health. When the coalition made its announcement he said:

... it creates a whole new service infrastructure, that offers ... evidence-based services to hundreds of thousands of young Australians and their families, who at the moment are locked out of any specialist support for what are the most common illnesses in early adulthood.

Professor Pat McGorry, the Australian of the Year, again, an incredibly well-credentialed expert in mental health, not just within our country but internationally, said of the coalition's policy that it would help up to 100,000 young people. He also said:

... this policy would save lives, ensure young lives are not stunted or derailed, and stem the tide of Australians with untreated mental illnesses flowing to our emergency departments, onto our streets and into our prisons.

These were the independent voices who looked, quite critically, at what the coalition had to offer, and they said that we were spot-on.

It is why, as I said before, I am disappointed with the response from the government tonight. I hoped that out of this motion we would get a sense of bipartisanship—that the government would accept that more needed to be done and that they would do it sooner rather than later. They will be saying to all and sundry that action is just around the corner, but they have said that for the last three years, and if people go meek and mild and weak in relation to this motion if it is put to a vote then they are really signing up to the government's continued plan of inaction. There has been much debate in relation to this motion about the facts and the contributions of both the former coalition government and the government since it was elected in 2007, but let me restate for the record—and it is incredibly important to do so: between 1995-96 and 2002-03, expenditure on mental health under the Howard government increased by 53 per cent, from \$792 million to \$1.2 billion. In 2006—and this is the most important point—the Howard government made the biggest single investment in mental health of \$1.9 billion over five years. So what we proposed with \$1.5 billion in the election campaign, had we been elected, would have been the second-biggest investment in mental health in this country's history, only matched by that \$1.9 billion which was put in place by the Howard government in 2006. When you look at Labor's record, it is only the last May budget that people need to be reminded of. This government tried to cut the money going

into mental health, and they should be condemned for that. This motion should be supported because it is in the interests of all Australians.