



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Federation Chamber**

**BILLS**

**Australian Immunisation Register and  
Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2017**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 9 August 2017**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** Brodtmann, Gai, MP

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**Ms BRODTMANN** (Canberra) (12:10): I want to commend the member for Brand on particularly those last comments about that family and the tragic death of their child from whooping cough. As she said, this is an entirely preventable disease. Imagine the despair, the horror and the trauma that that family went through in witnessing the death of their child from such a hideous disease and what we know is a preventable disease. I commend the member for Brand on that very powerful speech.

Whenever I speak on immunisation my thoughts always go to the book titled *I Can Jump Puddles* by Alan Marshall. It is a fabulous book. I read it in primary school. I said to my team when preparing for this today: 'Can you get some quotes out of the book for me so that I can relay the firsthand experience of someone who had polio, what it was like for them and how they overcame the challenges of that disability.' It was interesting that drawing quotes from the book was very, very difficult. Some members of my team had not heard of the book or, if they had, hadn't read it. So I send a message out to schools. I know that at the moment there are a lot of challenges with school curriculums. Schools are having to juggle a lot. But, given that this issue is so contentious—and constantly so; it is back in the news now, with recent films being shown and discussions being had by some in the other chamber on the value of immunisation—I think it would be worthwhile for parents of a certain age to dust off their copies of the book *I Can Jump Puddles* and give it to their children or grandchildren to read. For those in their 20s and 30s who are not aware of this really powerful novel, I suggest they go to their local library, get on Amazon or go to their local bookshop and get a copy of it and read it. If nothing has convinced you that immunisation is a vitally important protective mechanism for our community then that book will convince you. It's incredibly powerful.

As I said, this young man overcame significant adversity. He caught polio at a very young age in country Victoria, yet he achieved his dreams. I did find one quote. He writes:

It amazed me that they would imagine I would never walk again.

Imagine a child with a preventable disease being faced with the prospect of never being able to walk again. The fact is that this disease is preventable. So, do we want a recurrence of this disease? This young child, from country Victoria, was told that he would not be able to walk again. He writes:

I knew what I was going to do. I was going to break in wild horses and yell 'Ho! Ho!' and wave my hat in the air, and I was going to write a book like *The Coral Island*.

That was Alan Marshall's response to the hideous disease that is polio—a disease that has been eradicated from the world, thanks to immunisation. But, if we are not careful, it could rear its ugly head again and we could be facing the same scenario that children in the thirties, forties and fifties faced.

My mum, who grew up in a housing commission house in Melbourne, Victoria. She went to the local primary school and then she briefly went on to secondary school. When I was a child in the sixties and seventies, I remember my mum telling these stories about her classmates and what Melbourne looked like in a polio epidemic. This is what a city looks like when there is a polio epidemic: the city baths are shut down; all the swimming pools are shut down; and the schools are shut down. When you go back to school some of the school mates that you had before the school was shut down are not there anymore. Some have died and some have become paralysed as a result of polio; they can't come back to school. That is what it looks like to have a community with polio.

Is this the future we want for the country as a result of the resistance among some communities to be immunised?

Do we want our public places shut down? Theatres were shut down. Because it's a highly communicable disease, any place where people could catch the disease was shut down. As I said, the baths, the cinemas, the theatres, schools—all shut down. Can you imagine the trauma for young children of having your school shut down and

then coming back to school with some of your classmates not there because they are dead or they are significantly paralysed and dealing with the challenges of trying to live with this significant disability?

So this is the sort of future that some of these antivaxxer people are proposing for our country. Do we want this, given the fact that this is an entirely preventable disease? Do we want this for our young people? Do we want this for our community? Do we want this for our city? Do we want this for our nation? Do we want this for our world? The ignorance of it is breathtaking. It really is. These whooping cough stories—the trauma. Can you imagine it? Particularly when you have done everything you can to protect your child, can you imagine that, through no fault of your own, you lose your child through that tragic, hideous disease?

In returning to this legislation in the time that I have left, as we know the government announced it would pursue this No Jab, No Pay laws. These allow childcare centres to turn away children who are not immunised. While some states and territories have put these laws in place, there still isn't a national approach, as my colleagues have mentioned. The ACT is one of the states and territories that are holding back in implementing any arrangements in the absence of a national approach. One of the reasons the ACT is holding out is because a national approach would ensure that the interests of some of our most vulnerable groups are taken into account. Whether it's through disadvantage, newness to Australia or unfamiliarity with the English language, some in our community may not have access to, or won't be aware about, these immunisation programs. Therefore, the ACT government's concern is there would be further disadvantage.

The benefits of a national approach will ensure that information can be communicated widely and that information will be consistent over all states and territories. It is vitally important—harmonisation of legislation, harmonisation of communication and harmonisation of implementation. There's nothing more frustrating, particularly for Defence families that move around the country every two or three years than having these incredible inconsistencies between states and territories.

We welcome the government's renewed commitment. Since they've been in office, they've done nothing on this policy. The more people who are vaccinated, the fewer opportunities a disease has to spread. The National Immunisation Program Schedule includes vaccines against a total of 16 diseases. These include the routine child vaccinations against diseases that were once incredibly fatal—measles, diphtheria and whooping cough, as have been mentioned. Included in the 16 new vaccines are the HPV and meningococcal C vaccine. That is a terrific development.

Any misinformation around the science behind vaccines is dangerous and irresponsible. It's a public health risk. Labor welcomes the government finally funding a public campaign to combat this dangerous misinformation on vaccinations. It's something we've been calling on for some time. We have written to the Prime Minister to encourage urgent action on this. Only last week we saw a screening of an antivaxx film at a large cinema in central Melbourne. This is a democracy. People are entitled to screen shows that have a different view, a different opinion. They are dangerous in the fact that they are potentially putting lives at risk with this whooping cough and, potentially, polio in the future. They are dangerous, but the thing is: this is a democracy.

We need to empower people, to put the scientific information at their fingertips so that they can counter these views that are being disseminated through these films and through other campaigns. We seem to have been seeing a resurgence in these over recent years. We must ensure that our people are well armed with information to protect themselves against these uninformed comments about vaccination. We have a strong immunisation program and it's critical to eradicating life-threatening diseases. A failure to vaccinate is a threat to public health.

What is concerning, as my colleague the member for Brand has mentioned, are the comments made earlier this year by Senator Hanson when she questioned the safety of vaccinations. This sparked renewed discussion on the value of vaccination, of immunising against preventable diseases. I understand Senator Hanson later backed down on her suggestion that parents should use a, non-existent, test for vaccine allergies, but, unfortunately, what she hasn't backed down on are her outrageous comments on children with autism and her outrageous comments linking vaccines to cancer and autism. Even though she has in some way backed down on some of those comments, she has not backed down fully. Medical experts have highlighted that her comments were ignorant and dangerous. Unfortunately, showing once again his lack of leadership, the Prime Minister could not bring himself to directly criticise and counter Senator Hanson's comments.

Our leaders need to do everything possible to ensure parents know about the deadly risks of failing to vaccinate their children—as we are doing here today—not spreading misinformation. Most importantly, they should

not confuse things by making broad, misinformed statements based on ill advised scientific evidence and assumptions, and then withdrawing, partially, but not entirely, those comments so that these grey interpretations of what is actually happening in this space are still out there for people to be completely confused by.

The AMA has regularly paid tribute to the role played by family doctors in safely and effectively immunising generations of Australians against potentially deadly diseases. This is vitally important, because it is usually the first port of call for most families, particularly when they have little ones moving from the infant welfare centre, and the nurse there, up to the doctor and the local GP. There is that very early engagement, and that's why the role of the general practitioner is so vital in combating these preventable diseases.

The AMA accepts that there is still a small majority of the population that won't accept the science behind vaccinations. The AMA's president recently told Radio National that about eight per cent of the population are so-called vaccine-hesitant and are looking for any information that might lead them away from what is, with the exception of clean water, probably the most significant health mechanism we have got. That is a pretty powerful message: the most significant health measures we've got are clean water and vaccination. The facts are that vaccination plays an important role in protecting us from potentially deadly diseases like polio, whooping cough, and meningococcal disease. Polio is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus that invades the nervous system. It can cause total paralysis in a matter of hours and also death. Until the 1950s it crippled thousands and thousands of children every year in industrialised countries. But soon after the introduction of effective vaccines in the fifties and sixties polio was under control and practically eliminated as a public health problem in these countries.

The polio immunisation program is the best example of the transformative power of immunisation against preventable diseases. The polio immunisation program is absolutely the most powerful campaign and powerful education program in terms of talking to people about polio and about how, thanks to immunisation, it has been eradicated from our world. I ask anyone who in any way doubts this to go out—go to your library, bookshop, Amazon—and get out a copy of *I Can Jump Puddles* by Alan Marshall and see what it's like to live with polio, see the tragedy of polio and the challenges of polio and see that you can overcome in the end.