



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

CONSTITUENCY STATEMENTS

Dawson Electorate: Medical Workforce

SPEECH

Wednesday, 18 June 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Wednesday, 18 June 2014
Page 6563
Questioner
Speaker Christensen, George, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr CHRISTENSEN (Dawson—The Nationals Deputy Whip) (09:33): I rise to speak about the issue of doctor shortages in the Whitsundays. It seems strange that such a beautiful area and one of the greatest tourism destinations in the world cannot seem to attract enough local GPs. But that is the situation, and I have spoken about the impact of this issue on several occasions in this place. Today I want to focus on some good news and suggest a better path for tomorrow.

The Whitsundays have now been declared a district of workforce shortage, which opens the door for foreign-trained doctors in the Whitsundays to apply for an exemption under section 19AB(3) of the Health Insurance Act 1973. As a result, we hope to see one of the doctors who has left the region because of issues there, Dr Solgi, return to the Whitsundays with his wife, Shiva, who is also a doctor. She had to leave because she was not allowed to work in the same practice with her husband because of the restrictions that will now be removed because of this DWS declaration. As I said have said, they have not been able to do that because of the restrictions in the act, restrictions which could only have been overcome with this DWS. So the declaration is welcome for the overworked doctors currently operating in the Whitsundays and for the residents who need and deserve proper health care.

But I do question the process by which these declarations were made. I note the Department of Health website outlines the information used in making these determinations, including:

The latest Medicare billing statistics, which account for all active Medicare billing and therefore give an accurate indication of the geographic distribution of doctors across Australia ...

I am afraid that does not give an accurate indication at all. The data is converted into full-time equivalent doctors to work out a ratio, which caters for many doctors working part time but does not account for few doctors working far too many hours. Dr El-Baky, from 121 Medical Centre in the Whitsundays, advised me yesterday that his practice had 30,786 patients on the books, cared for by himself and two part-time GPs. That figure only includes patients who have presented in the past two years, which suggests the formula is not working in the real world.

The department's second source of information is ABS census data, which is supposed to give an indication of the geographic distribution of the Australian population. That census, a snapshot in time, is a poor indication of how many people are in need of a doctor in an area where tourism is the biggest, and almost only, industry. International tourists get sick, but they are not covered by Medicare. In the Whitsundays, with only a small resident population, they see 600,000 interstate visitors a year. If 10 per cent of those visitors need to see a doctor on their holidays, that is an extra 60,000 patients. The Whitsundays see a high turnover of doctors at the Proserpine Hospital, and, with their Medicare provider numbers attached to the region, it creates an impression that there are a lot more GPs than there actually are. So this flawed data does not account for the reality. I think the system needs to be reviewed or the minister given power to intervene. (*Time expired*)