



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE
HEALTH LEGISLATION
AMENDMENT (MEDICARE) BILL 2003

In Committee

SPEECH

Thursday, 11 March 2004

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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Questioner
Speaker McLucas, Sen Jan

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Senator McLUCAS (Queensland) (11.14 am)—I would like to speak broadly about what has occurred in the past 24 hours and to express my disappointment at the deal that has been struck between Independent senators, some of whom have very publicly defended Medicare in the past. What we have now is a system that is not Medicare. Medicare is dead, according to Professor Deeble today, and it is on the heads of those four people who have said that we can give up the thing that has made Australia's health system internationally recognised as the best health system in the world.

We have seen Medicare slowly dismantled over the last eight years. It has been slowly pulled away because the Prime Minister could not say what he thought—that Medicare is not a fair system. That is what he thinks. He does not think that Medicare is a system that should be supported. So, instead of doing what he wanted to do in the 1980s—instead of saying openly and plainly to the Australian people that he was going to get rid of Medicare—he has done it in this underhand way. He has pulled apart the health care system that Australians trust and believe in. Yesterday was the death knell for Medicare. Yesterday we saw the end of a universal health insurance system that treated people according to their health needs and not according to what they had in their pockets.

Medicare was simple and fair. Whether you lived in Burketown or in Bankstown, you were treated according to your health needs. Now we have a system whereby a person who makes a decision to go the doctor has to understand what the EPC means, what RRMA means and whether their doctor lives in a RRMA 2 or a RRMA 3 zone. These are not issues that people want to make decisions about when they go to the doctor. They do not know whether they are on the FTBA or whether they are on a \$300 threshold or a \$700 threshold. If they have a sick kid, they want to go to the doctor and they want a bulk-billing doctor. Those days are gone—they are finished—and it is on the heads of those four people who have said they will support the Prime Minister's dismantling of Medicare.

We are now faced with a complex and confusing health care system, when we had a system that was internationally recognised as the best. What have we got for it in Queensland? That is a very interesting question. A deal has been done in Queensland such that James Cook University will get an extra 12 medical student places. As a North Queenslander, and knowing the quality of graduates from James Cook University, of course I accept that—of course I think that is a fantastic thing—but let us look at the detail. Let us be really clear about what Senator Harris has got for North Queensland. He has given up Medicare, apparently for 12 medical school places. I will ask some questions about those 12 places later. I certainly hope that we do have the data on them, because I do not know whether it is 12 places or two. If we have given up Medicare for two medical places at James Cook University, it is not a really good deal. We have not done very well in Queensland.

Let us look at the other states. Why is it that the whole of Tasmania can get the bulk-billing incentive? What is the difference between Tasmanians and the people who live in the ACT, where the level of bulk-billing is in fact lower? Why has Tasmania been given this special incentive? Why didn't we look at it a little more equitably? Senator Harradine has said that it has nothing to do with the fact that he comes from Tasmania. I do not think so and neither did Tony Abbott on *AM* radio this morning. On *AM* this morning he said, 'That is the democratic process.' What he meant was: 'Of course Senator Harradine and Senator Murphy got bulk-billing for everyone in Tasmania, because that is the democratic process. They stood up for their states.'

Senator McLUCAS—That is what he said, Senator Harradine. Listen to it. What he means is that you did the deal for Tasmania, and we missed out in Queensland. That is not fair. Medicare is a fair system. That fairness has been undermined by a decision that RRMA 3 to 7 will apply everywhere in Tasmania. Where is the justice in that? Where is the fairness in the decision that a RRMA 1 or 2 in Tasmania gets included in the RRMA 3 to 7? We want a fair and equitable system in this country, and now we do not have it.

Let us look at what will happen to people accessing allied health services through the EPC program. We have had an analysis of EPC. EPC, according to the department and to the medical practitioners, is not a good system.

Admittedly that is because there was not a payment to those allied health workers, but that system has been found to be ineffective. There is a whole range of conditions by which a general practice can become an EPC compliant practice. Does the woman with a sick child know that? No, she does not and she should not need to. If she has a sick child, she does not want to work out whether or not her doctor's surgery has EPC approval. How would she know?

Let us go to the doctors whom we recognise—and whom Senator Harris has talked so passionately about—are working so hard to deliver the services that our community wants. What sort of paperwork will they now have to go through to access these sorts of services for their clients? They do not like doing it, and now they have more red tape and more work to do. We heard over and over during the Medicare inquiry that doctors do not want any more red tape. What are we doing to them now? We are telling them they have more work to do—more administration. Doctors want to see people. Doctors are trained to make people better, not to fill in forms. But now we have more forms for them, thank you very much, through the EPC program.

There is a range of other questions that need to be answered during this process, and I certainly hope we get to them. Let us go to MediConnect. Why is it that Tasmania—that place again—and South Australia have moved up the line? We are told that it is because they were close. I would like to see some analysis of that. Why is it that doctors who operate in states other than South Australia, the home of Senator Lees, and Tasmania, the home of Senator Harradine and Senator Murphy, miss out? That is not fair. Why should we miss out on a program that is regarded as being beneficial to our community? That is simply not fair. According to Mr Abbott this morning, it is part of the democratic process. This is not a fair package. This is the dismantling of Medicare. This is John Howard getting his own way, and the people of Australia will be very disappointed in him. I will make some contributions and ask further questions later.