



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) (12.19 pm)—I find this absolutely extraordinary. For over two years we have raised the classification system known as RRMA through the Senate estimates committee process and have on every occasion been advised that the anomalies that exist in RRMA will stay because any other system would always have the same anomalies. But now we have Senator Murphy agreeing to a package because another system is going to come along. There is no consistency in the message that the department, through its minister, is providing this place. We have raised this on many occasions. Senator Forshaw has raised the problem of Nimbin many times, I have raised the problem of west of Nambour on many occasions and Senator Murphy has come to estimates and talked about his particular problem. But the message has been consistent that we cannot change the RRMAs because, if you change it and put something else in its place, it will have exactly the same problem. Why is it that all of a sudden we can get an unequivocal commitment from the minister that we can fix this? I am sorry, but we have been told for too long that we cannot. Senator Murphy, for you to accept that as gospel, I think you have potentially been duped.

I want to also talk about what happens next. If we change the RRMAs, if we move from a system that we do understand to some other system, which might be by local government area or might be by locality, how do you cost that? How do you work out what it is going to cost? How do we know what we are buying in this package? We are just saying, 'Maybe we'll work it out a bit later; it'll be okay. Don't worry about it.' We do not know what it is going to cost. How can a government manage the health department of this nation by doing deals with senators and saying, 'We'll talk about it later'? We do not know what we are buying, they do not know what they are buying and you do not know what you are getting.

I am sorry, but we do not know what we are getting in this package. I think it was a little naive of those senators to think that they could get a letter from the minister and that we would sort it out later—it might be local government area and it might be locality, but we are not quite sure—when they know that the consistent message from the department has been that, wherever you draw a line, there will be an anomaly. That is why the RRMA system is not a good measure, and the departmental officers know it. I will leave the question of bulk-billing till later, when we might get a bit more time.