

## MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

### Health Services

Mrs HULL (Riverina) (4.22 p.m.)—I am in awe—maybe I am gobsmacked—about what I have just heard coming from the Minister for Health and Ageing at the dispatch box. The fact is that the program that we speak of was not in place for four years. It is simply not true to say that is the case. In fact, the minister's own department has come out and, in a 'Notice to general practitioners', told them:

Discontinuation of the Medicare Dental Items for People with Chronic Conditions and Complex Care Needs (Items 85011-87777)

... introduced by the previous government in November 2007, are to be withdrawn from the Medicare Benefits Schedule.

It was not four years.

When the Health Insurance Amendment (Medicare Dental Services) Bill 2007 was introduced into this House I welcomed it. I said:

This bill provides some much needed services. From 1 November 2007 new dental items will be introduced to the Medicare Benefits Schedule.

It is simply not true to state, Minister, that this program has been running four years and is a dismal failure. She told, in fact, another slight untruth. The minister stated at the dispatch box that a GP referral would continue to allow access to this program until 30 June 2008, when the department, on issuing the above advice to general practitioners, quite clearly outlines:

A GP referral dated before 30 March 2008 is not, by itself, sufficient for a patient to be considered to have commenced treatment.

That is a fact; that is what the department has put out. Referrals have been declared not, by themselves, to be 'sufficient for a patient to be considered to have commenced treatment'.

The serious thing is that the minister thinks that three months, from the end of March to the end of June, is enough to overcome the waiting lists in rural and regional Australia. If the minister thinks that three months is sufficient to do that in the electorates of Riverina, Cowper and many others—I think the quote was 'in consultation it was considered sufficient time for people to get adequate treatment under this program'—then she is seriously, seriously out of touch.

The other issue is that these people, as the minister has just indicated, are obviously going to be forced into a state and Commonwealth system, when it is a fact that only 10 per cent of the dentists are in the state system. There is no hope for people who are currently suffering because of this shortage. In the last few days, forward estimates have been declared to be not an issue, although they were an issue to the extent that if the forward estimates did not include the carers bonus then the carers bonus certainly would not be guaranteed. But isn't it funny that, over the years, what we had coming from the other side of the House—when we were in government and the current government were in opposition—was the constant cry about the Keating dental program? They said: 'Remember that rotten government that was over there?'—the past government—'They slashed the Keating dental program. They tore it away; they took it away; they removed it from the Australian people.' But it did not matter that that was

not in the forward estimates. It did not matter that it was a sunset program, to sunset in 1996. There was nothing in the forward estimates—isn't that the funny thing? It is not 'do as I do'; it is 'do as I say.' There is one rule for one and one rule for the other. When you were in opposition, it was amazing that it was slashed and not in the forward estimates. Now you are on this side of the House, it does not matter that things are not in the forward estimates: 'If it's not there, then we don't have to fund it. Thankfully, it wasn't in the forward estimates.' That is a serious issue.

I would like to bring to the minister's attention a letter that I have received. I can honestly say I do not know the lady who has written to me, but she has clearly identified the issue that we are discussing here today and that I am very concerned about along with the information that has been delivered at the dispatch box that is not correct. It says:

Dear Mrs. Hull

Attached is Minister Nicola Roxon's office response(5/3/08) to my enquiry re what will happen when the MBS Dental Items are discontinued on June 30 2008. That Ministers office stated that only 15,000 people had taken up the services. I replied this program had only been in operation since November 1st 2007—not 4 years as incorrectly stated on their correspondence—

Again, the minister is putting out incorrect information. The correspondence continues:

The Federal Government quietly announced changes to the MBS Dental program on Sunday March 2nd. The decision to drop the MBS Dental item numbers will spell extreme difficulty for people who were at last able to access a huge range of dental services—including basic care through to bridge work and prosthesis—from their local dentist.

There is nothing in the press release from Minister Nicola Roxon that convinces me that her proposal is equal to or better than, the \$4250/2yr program that started last November 1st 2007—

not four years ago, and it says:

The Medicare November 07 Dental program has been the best program for managing the dental care of people of all ages with a chronic disease. ... it has been an inclusive program—

Remember, I do not know this person; I do not know the person's politics or who it is—

This program has been open to children and adults ... able bodied and disabled alike and has been taken up by the local Dentists. It means local people get access to local Dentists. The patient doesn't have to be in dental crisis to get access to dental care ... the care is planned with better patient outcomes ... the patient isn't forced to access a public hospital dental clinic ... and wait years for minimal treatment. The 2007 Medicare Care Plan program puts responsibility on all the participants to work towards the best health outcome for the patient—and it gives the patient control over the process—treats people with respect.

\$150 voucher per annum per 12-17 year old, is not really going to do much to assist the (dare I say it) "Working families"

Dentists that I have talked with, who participated in a Commonwealth Dental Service "voucher" scheme, say it didn't work for a number of reasons.

If, after confirming my advice to you, you feel as incensed as I that this program will go, then please, ask the question of the Minister ... What happens to those who maybe part way through their treatment—

The minister has already given us a non-factual answer at the dispatch box by saying that, if you had a referral from a doctor, you would be able to access your treatment until June 2008. In fact, her own department, in the correspondence it has sent out, says that is not the case. The correspondence continues:

And now anxious and distressed—they may not have the financial ability to complete their dental treatment ... the Minister needs to know what the end result will be for this section of the community ... the group that GP's and Nurses manage with Chronic Diseases and dental needs, come July 08 Will country people be forced back onto regional public hospital/Dental clinic waiting list???

Judging by the response from the minister at the dispatch box, obviously they will. I repeat: only 10 per cent of dentists are working in the public health service. We are trying to address a very serious issue. It should not be addressed in a smoke and mirrors way. It needs to have truth and fact provided. (*Time expired*)