

HEALTH SERVICES AMENDMENT (GUARANTEEING FREE PUBLIC HOSPITAL SERVICES) BILL 2014

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Bill introduced on motion by Mr John Robertson, read a first time and printed.**Second Reading****Mr JOHN ROBERTSON** (Blacktown—Leader of the Opposition) [10.06 a.m.]: I move:
That this bill be now read a second time.

The change that Labor seeks to enshrine today is fundamental. Free access to hospital emergency rooms in New South Wales is non-negotiable. Today is our opportunity to guarantee the protection of our hospital emergency rooms from the obscene precedent set by Tony Abbott's general practitioner [GP] tax. Our society is based on the principle that hospitals are open to young and old people, the wealthy and the poor who need them in an emergency at any time of day, even the middle of the night. Labor built Medicare. Labor is proud of Medicare and Australians are ferociously protective of it. They know how precious it is compared with the inequitable healthcare systems that are found elsewhere in the world. They also know that the Abbott budget trashes Medicare. A \$7 GP tax from a Government that promised no surprises and no excuses is a very nasty surprise and the \$15 billion ripped from New South Wales public hospitals is a complete kick in the guts. How dare Tony Abbott and the Liberals kill off our system of universal health care without saying a word before the last election? Tony Abbott may be wheeling the cash registers into the GP clinics but members on this side will not allow the Premier to wheel the cash registers into public hospitals. Today the Parliament has an opportunity to protect New South Wales hospitals from this garbage and from a weak and wobbly Premier who cannot stand up to Tony Abbott, his best mate.

Under the bill Labor seeks to amend section 57 of the Health Services Act 1997 to prevent a patient in a public hospital from being charged for any health service that is currently free. The bill further states that even if any law or agreement between the Commonwealth and New South Wales is amended to provide for the charging of a co-payment, a New South Wales hospital is not entitled or authorised to charge any fee. Labor's reason for introducing the bill is simple. The Liberal Party in New South Wales cannot be trusted to keep access to public hospitals free.

Across this nation families are frightened out of their wits by Tony Abbott's \$7 GP tax. The tax will not only apply to GP visits, it will also apply to blood tests, X-rays, infants needing immunisation for whooping cough, women worried about breast lumps and pensioners vulnerable to the flu. In fact, if a person with a chronic condition has to see a doctor two or three times a week and maintains a constant log of prescriptions, that person's liability under this tax is endless. The people know something else: the \$7 GP tax introduced by Tony Abbott will not remain at \$7. It will rise to \$15; it will sneak up to \$30. If the Prime Minister puts his hand on his heart and rules out such an increase who would believe him anyway after what we witnessed less than a month ago in his first budget?

The real tragedy of this GP tax is that its poison will seep right across our healthcare system. Our GP clinics do not exist in isolation. If there is a \$7 GP tax many people will try to evade it by turning up at the free public hospital. This will especially be the case for the most

vulnerable in our society and people such as pensioners. Indeed, the Commission of Audit made exactly the same point. I quote from the commission's report:

By introducing co-payments for services that are currently covered by bulkbilling there is a risk of cost shifting as some patients may seek out free treatment in the emergency room of public hospitals for services that would more appropriately be treated by a general practitioner.

The report continued:

To address this issue State Governments should consider introducing equivalent co-payments for certain emergency room settings.

The Abbott budget adopted this recommendation explicitly permitting States to introduce a new charge for hospital emergency visits. It is hard to overstate how foolish such a policy would be. The most dangerous act any government could undertake would be to deter someone from reporting to hospital for what turns out to be a serious risk to their health. That is exactly what Tony Abbott's GP tax will do, and a hospital tax would do the same.

Across New South Wales thousands of families could literally be forced to choose whether to feed their sick children that night or take them to a hospital. They may be forced to stay at home anxious at how little money is in the household budget, unaware that their little girl's earache is actually pneumonia or their little boy's stomach pain is actually appendicitis. We should never want to live in a State where parents are forced to make such a life or death decision—namely, to self-diagnose from a position of ignorance or cut off from expert advice. Our doctors never fail to remind us of the importance of preventative health. They tell us that early detection saves money and it saves lives. A tax on emergency hospital rooms would turn this decades-long wisdom on its head. It would send a shameful message to every person in New South Wales—namely, do not bother accessing our hospital system until you are in so much pain you can barely pick up the phone to call for an ambulance.

There is a reason everyone from the Australian Medical Association to the NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association has described a hospital tax as unworkable. Under Medicare, fought for and delivered by Labor, our hospitals have traditionally been cash-free zones. Our doctors, nurses and surgeons are meant to be saving lives, not acting as tax collectors for the Government. It is not their job to rattle the tin and demand cash before treating someone's bloody gash to the head or performing emergency heart surgery. Simon Judkins from the Australian College for Emergency Medicine told the ABC:

Trying to ask people to pay ... whatever the co-payment is up front would be flawed and very difficult to manage. And doing it retrospectively once the actual diagnosis has been made and then somebody deciding whether this was a GP-type problem, again ... the bureaucracy involved in any sort of system like that would be impossible ...

In other words, doctors and nurses know the idea of a hospital tax is ludicrous. It is obscene; it is also self-defeating. It would cost more to collect the revenue than the revenue received. This is a final vital reason why Labor's bill must be passed as a matter of urgency.

The New South Wales Premier cannot be trusted to stand-up to Tony Abbott. The Premier's stance on the Abbott budget has been one of phoney opposition from day one. The morning after the budget the Premier said it was a "kick in the guts" to New South Wales. Two days later he was standing next to the Prime Minister and had the chance to give him a public drubbing then and there about the budget. Dennis Napthine had an angry phone call with the

Prime Minister; even Campbell Newman had a go. Our Premier hoisted the white flag almost immediately. The so-called "kick in the guts budget" was downgraded to a mere "challenge".

To this day Premier Mike Baird has refused to condemn the Abbott Government's GP tax, the Abbott Government's petrol tax, the scandalous cuts to pensions and Newstart allowance, and its unfair deregulation of university fees.

When it comes to the Premier's view of the hospital tax we have seen the same weasel words. On Wednesday 14 May the Premier said that he would be ruling it out, but only days later standing shoulder to shoulder with his good mate Tony Abbott he said:

We'll be considering and obviously watching events as they unfold. We're in a position where we will monitor the impact on emergency departments and others—it is part of the broader discussion we want to have on health.

That was the Premier's chance, on behalf of the people of New South Wales, to stand-up to the Prime Minister. That was his chance to defend our public hospitals and do it to Tony Abbott's face. It was a real test of the Premier's mettle. He failed. What on earth is the Premier talking about when he says he wants a broader discussion of the hospital tax? As far as Labor is concerned there is no broader discussion to be had. Free access to public hospital emergency wards is non-negotiable. But I fear if the New South Wales Liberal-Nationals Government supports the GP tax, then it has no option but to back the tax at the hospital ward. The taxes are inseparable. They are like two heads of the one monster. You cannot have one without the other.

Let us never forget that the New South Wales Liberal-Nationals Government has already ripped \$3 billion from hospitals in New South Wales. It has closed an entire ward at the Prince of Wales Hospital, cut the cardiac unit at Blacktown Mount Druitt Hospital, forced the maternity unit at Nepean Hospital to turn expectant mothers away, betrayed nurses from Lismore to Bathurst, left Sutherland and St George hospitals crying out for refurbishment and left the Hunter without a specialist eye clinic.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Oatley will have an opportunity to debate this issue at a later time. The member for Oatley will come to order.

Mr JOHN ROBERTSON: The member for Oatley is getting rather excited. His reaction is an acknowledgement of the failures of this Government. As we sit here today, hospitals at Gosford, Wyong and Maitland have some of the most stressed and overwhelmed emergency departments in this State. Their treatment times are well in excess of the National Emergency Access Target. Across New South Wales in the last quarter, a whopping 33,678 patients or 6 per cent of total emergency admissions gave up and left hospital without receiving treatment. I very much fear that instead of owning up to their responsibilities to properly resource our hospital emergency wards and ease these crippling pressures, Liberal members in New South Wales are eager to follow their colleagues in Canberra. They are itching to shift more of the burden onto the seriously sick.

A tax on hospital emergency wards is in the Liberal Party's DNA. If the Premier is genuinely prepared to rule the tax out, I challenge him to back his words with bipartisan action. It is time to protect our hospitals and our patients—not just say it, but commit those principles to paper. Premier, if you truly oppose a hospital tax, then you should join with Labor and enshrine that position into law. A tax on hospital emergency visits must never be allowed in New South Wales. I commend the bill to the House.

Debate adjourned on motion by Mr Gareth Ward and set down as an order of the day for a future day.