

Queensland doctors 'unfairly suspended' on full pay for speaking up for patients

Queensland Health has suspended nearly 100 doctors on full pay - some for daring to speak up for their patients - as the state desperately seeks 46,000 more healthcare workers by 2032.

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Some of the doctors have decades experience and are earning up to \$500,000 a year.

Doctors with decades of experience are being “unfairly” suspended on full pay for months and even years for daring to speak up for their patients as Queensland grapples with a spiralling health workforce crisis and exploding waitlists.

The Courier-Mail can reveal that taxpayers are currently paying full salaries to 91 clinicians suspended on full pay - with some earning up to \$500,000 a year - at the same time Health Minister Tim Nicholls says he is “pulling every lever” to get 46,000 more workers by 2032.

The Australian Salaried Medical Officers’ Federation Queensland (ASMOFQ) says doctors who boldly advocate for their patients - criticising Queensland Health in the process - “suddenly disappear off the ward” in a system that lacks transparency or fairness.

Queensland Health has been accused of using a clause in the Public Sector Act 2022 that allows them to deny natural justice to the stood-down medics as long as they continue to pay them.

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Dr Siva Senthuran said the suspensions were making doctors feel unsafe to raise concerns.

ASMOFQ Vice President Siva Senthuran said the trend in suspensions was making doctors feel unsafe to raise concerns and was ultimately killing the sustainability of the workforce.

“Doctors are often labelled “troublesome” if they dare to advocate for what is best for their patients. Suddenly they disappear off the ward with colleagues unaware of what has happened,” Dr Senthuran said.

“The suspensions are not transparent and usually come with gag orders”

While there are valid suspensions for unacceptable conduct, the union is concerned that too many are imposed instantly without procedural fairness or adherence to natural justice, leaving clinicians unable to respond to allegations or understand if or when they may return to work.

“This is especially damaging in regional, rural and remote hospitals as well as hard-to-recruit specialties, where every doctor is critical to service delivery,” Dr Senthuran said.

The union reports that respected clinicians, who are left in limbo with no resolution, often leave Queensland Health and go to private practice or move interstate to rebuild their careers.

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And suspension culture is hindering much needed recruitment.

“These departures worsen existing workforce shortages and make it harder for already understaffed departments to maintain services,” Dr Senthuran said.

“When doctors see colleagues suspended without clear justification or fair process, it creates an environment of fear and disengagement rather than collaboration and trust.”

Queensland Health insists they follow the requirements under the Public Sector Act 2022 when considering suspending of employee which is always a last resort.

Health Minister Tim Nicholls reported last week that there were disturbing projections of workforce shortfalls by 2032 - 5300 more doctors and 21,331 nurses are needed.

There are more than 60,000 Queenslanders waiting for elective surgery in Queensland.

Mr Nicholls has refused to review the suspension processes for doctors, arguing patient safety would remain the primary concern.

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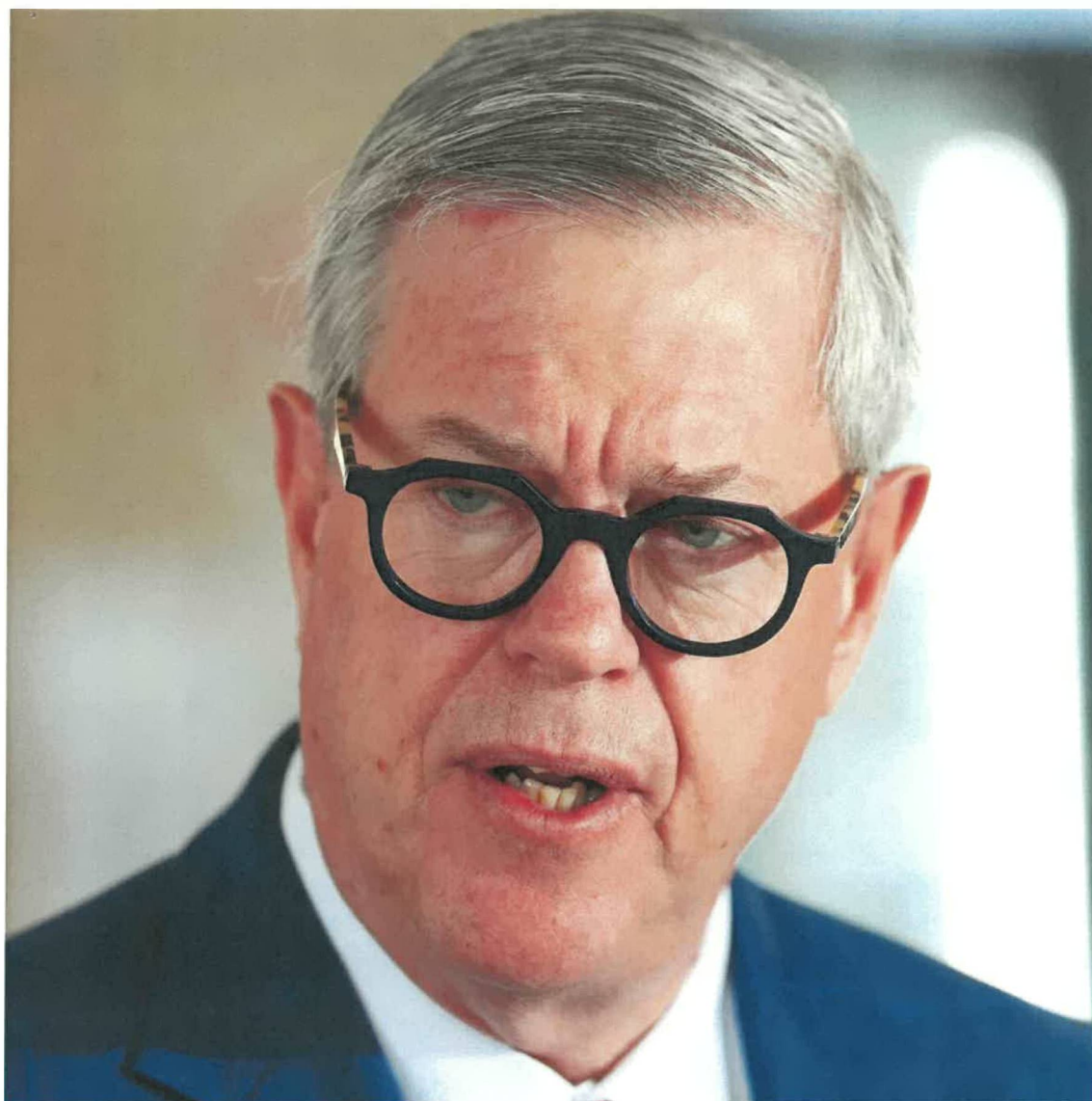
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“In instances where we are concerned about patient safety, it may be that suspension is the appropriate course of action,” he said.

“I want to emphasize that suspension is the last port of call, not the first harbor for administration of the health system.”

In the past two weeks, The Courier-Mail has revealed exploding waitlists for neurosurgical and haematology appointments, with some people waiting up to five times longer than medically recommended.

Dr Senthuran has met with Mr Nicholls and Director General David Rosengren to discuss the need for change in the suspension process and to allow vital doctors and specialists to get back to work quicker.



Minister for Health and Ambulance Services Tim Nicholls. Picture: Nigel Hallett

Mr Nicholls said practitioners are afforded the right to seek a review of the decision making process, despite accusations Queensland Health are using a loophole in the Public Sector Act.

“I think it’s important that we have faith in the system and that the system is designed to ensure patient safety and patient outcomes, and so that is the process that is in place.”

Asked why he would not consider a review when there are concerns this could kill the sustainability of the workforce, Mr Nicholls again said doctors could seek a review.

“Of those 15,000 doctors, those number of suspensions, it relates to less than 0.001 per cent,” he said.

ASMOFQ is advocating for accountability from Hospital and Health Service (HHS) executives in all matters relating to suspensions.

The union wants public reporting by each HHS of the number of clinicians suspended and the length of suspension, to ensure transparency in the use of this power.

Dr Senthuran said there must be more timely resolutions.

“Currently, HHSs need only assert that “alternative duties have been considered and deemed inappropriate,” a claim that can be difficult to contest. This lack of transparency erodes trust and creates the potential for misuse,” he said.

A Queensland Health spokesman said the 91 suspensions represent 0.096 per cent of Queensland Health’s total frontline clinician workforce of 94,493.

“Queensland Health is committed to providing a dynamic and responsive health system where our workforce is valued and empowered to provide health services to Queenslanders.

“Patient and staff safety is always the priority and is taken into account when a decision-maker is considering suspension or finding alternative duties for an employee. Suspensions occur in accordance with legislative provisions and are an administrative action that is taken only when necessary,” the spokesman said.

“Suspension is not the automatic or default position. Employee suspensions are applied only after a decision-maker has carefully considered all reasonable alternatives, such as reassigning the employee to alternative duties or implementing other suitable working arrangements.”

One doctor who was suspended and ultimately decided to leave Queensland Health told The Courier-Mail that they still struggle to understand why their executive took the action to suspend.

“The change in executive management, their decisions and expectations without adequate consultation impacted negatively on my professional abilities and were a large part of my decision to leave,” they said.

Another doctor, who was suspended due to a complaint from a colleague, said that a fair and timely investigation could have resolved the issue.

They chose to leave for professional and personal development, aiming for a place that valued skills and offered growth opportunities.

“I believe the admin chose to sideline me instead of addressing underlying issues like bullying and harassment complaints from junior staff over several years.”

Another doctor pointed out that not all HHSs engaged in poor treatment.

But at one HHS allegations against them could not be proven by the medical governing body and was dismissed but hospital management still took action.

“I did not agree with the action instead I left.”

Last week speaking of the workforce crisis Mr Nicholls highlighted 46,000 more workers were needed by 2032

“We are pulling every lever we can, but there is more work to be done if we are going to get to 46,000 and the first step in doing that is something that Labor failed to do and that is to actually carry out the gap analysis to find out where the holes in the workforce are,” he said.

Queensland Legislative Assembly

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