TABLED 23/9
18 OCT 2007

MI148295
MO: H/07/06190

Mr Neil Laurie
The Clerk of the Parliament
Email: TableOffice@parliament.qld.gov.au

Dear Mr Laurie

Thank you for your letter dated 9 August 2007, regarding petition No. 859-07 received by the Queensland Legislative Assembly concerning the Patient Travel Subsidy Scheme (PTSS).

A comprehensive examination of the PTSS was undertaken by Queensland Health and finalised in January 2007. The examination included reviewing administrative processes and the existing guidelines, consultation and discussions with key internal and external stakeholders and interstate counterparts, an examination of expenditure and activity, and an analysis of issues raised in Ministerial correspondence, policy papers and past reviews.

The examination confirmed the difficulties experienced by patients and their families in accessing health services in rural and remote Queensland and highlighted the costs associated with travel and accommodation to access essential specialist services. These are issues that have been highlighted by organisations such as The Cancer Council Queensland.

I recently announced that the PTSS mileage rate for eligible patients utilising private transport to access essential specialist medical services will be increased from 10 cents to 15 cents per kilometre, bringing the Queensland mileage rate in line with those in other States and Territories. Queensland's 50 kilometre minimum distance threshold is more generous than that offered by any other State or Territory, and enables a greater number of Queenslanders to access assistance through the scheme. I believe that this subsidy covers the petrol costs of an average car.

In addition to the rate increase, Queensland Health is reducing the number of forms patients need to complete to apply for assistance under the scheme. Queensland Health has also initiated a project that will explore new strategies to support patient accommodation.

A further review of the PTSS has been undertaken by the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs. This review has not only considered written submissions from private individuals, non-Government organisations and State and Territory Governments, but has also conducted public hearings in major centres around Australia. I understand that a report of findings and recommendations was released last month. Due consideration is being given to the findings and recommendations of this report.

The Queensland Government has also provided a written submission to this inquiry which calls on the Commonwealth Government to consider several proposals that would assist patients. These proposals include the request for the Commonwealth Government to consider the development of a specific benefit to be made available through Centrelink to support patients and their families who need to relocate to be closer or to access long term treatment. This could potentially provide enormous assistance to cancer patients who often need to access long term treatment.

In addition, since there is no capacity for medical specialists to charge Medical Benefits Schedule for consultations undertaken through Telehealth, I have requested the Commonwealth Government to urgently consider developing a schedule of Medical Benefits Schedule payments for use with Telehealth consultations for more effective delivery of specialist's consultations.

I assure you that Queensland Health is committed to improving access by patients to appropriate treatments. The PTSS is just one strategy utilised by Queensland Health to assist rural and regional patients to access specialist medical services. However, it should be noted, the scheme is intended to provide a financial subsidy for transport and accommodation costs only, not to reimburse and cover all costs.

Should you have any queries regarding my advice to you, Ms Dorothy Vicenzino, Director Integrated Patient Transport Reform Project, will be pleased to assist you and can be contacted on telephone (07) 3234 0925.

Yours sincerely

STEPHEN ROBERTSON MP