



The Hon. Greg Hunt MP
Minister for Health

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INTERVIEW WITH SABRA LANE
ABC AM

E&OE...

Topics: Aged Care Royal Commission; strawberry contamination.

SABRA LANE:

When the Prime Minister announced the inquiry yesterday, two ministers were by his side, one of them was the Health Minister Greg Hunt, who now joins *AM* in our Canberra House studio. Good morning and welcome to the program.

GREG HUNT:

Good morning, Sabra.

SABRA LANE:

What was the one piece of evidence that convinced Cabinet that a royal commission was needed?

GREG HUNT:

In particular, the increase in the number of facilities where it was found that there was serious risk to residents from two up to 22 up to 61 cases over the last three years, that's a 177 per cent increase in just last year alone.

And as we have shone a light through the agencies and authorities on safety, on care, what has come to light is that there are risks. The overwhelming majority of facilities and nurses and carers do an amazing job but there are too many risks and we have a duty of care to take care of those who helped build this country.

SABRA LANE:

We just heard in that report, two workers to 72 patients. How is that acceptable?

GREG HUNT:

Well, it's not. And I think the answer here is that we are calling a royal commission...

SABRA LANE:

Will the royal commission look at that, staff ratios?

GREG HUNT:

...we are calling the royal commission which has broad powers to look at all of the issues in relation to quality of care and, indeed, very specifically it has the capacity to go wherever they wish in terms of any other matters that the commissioners might want but above all else, two fundamental tasks are to protect and to plan. Protect is all about examining the quality of care, the safety of residents, ensuring that our residents and older Australians and senior Australians are given the best possible care.

And planning is about the fact that the number of people over 85 in Australia will nearly quadruple. It will increase by 3.8 times from 2015 to 2055. That means we go from 500,000 to 1.9 million people over 85, our needs will simply continue to grow and we want to bring it all together and that was very much Scott Morrison's focus, it's personal passion of his.

SABRA LANE:

Okay. There have been dozens of media and parliamentary inquiries into aged care in recent years, shaming people in companies. Is it the case that only the glare of a royal commission's spotlight, like the banking royal commission, will be the only thing that brings about effective cultural change in the industry?

GREG HUNT:

That was our conclusion, that's why we're holding a royal commission, because nothing is as powerful nor as broad reaching, nor as authoritative as a royal commission. It brings it all together. And it's both dealing with present but also preparing for this grand national challenge as we go forward.

SABRA LANE:

How much of a coincidence is it that the inquiry was announced on the eve of a six-month long, two-part *Four Corners* investigation?

GREG HUNT:

I think the primary thing here is that in his early briefings and we're only three weeks into the term of Scott Morrison. He asked the question, can I be assured that these cases are individual cases or is there a risk that there is a systemic challenge? And I know that in my...

SABRA LANE:

So, something that Cabinet talked about for days or weeks?

GREG HUNT:

Well, I know that on the very first day, Ken Wyatt raised it with the Prime Minister. And I know that on the very first event that we did together, when we talked about cystic fibrosis, Scott Morrison and I had a discussion in the margins about this. And of course, he helped build – as Treasurer – the More Choices for a Longer Life Package only six-months ago as we were designing it. So this has been a deep personal focus of his.

And on his time, his watching, his responsibility, he said – with us, working across the Cabinet, I want to make this caring for older Australians a signature of my time as Prime Minister. And he's got on to it immediately, he's got on to it. And we look at all of the different things that come in. But this is his moment as Prime Minister, where one of the most fundamental things he's doing immediately is to help protect and to plan.

SABRA LANE:

Okay. Will it include retirement homes?

GREG HUNT:

So, wherever Commonwealth care is delivered, that will be considered. And in terms of the specifics of retirement homes, we've said to the states, the Prime Minister's said to the states, you regulate them but if you would like this to be considered we are happy to include it.

SABRA LANE:

You've said that the Prime Minister wants this to be a signature of his term. If it requires a big Commonwealth injection of funds to fix it, how prepared is the government to put the extra millions, maybe billions, into the system?

GREG HUNT:

So, we're adding a billion dollars a year to the aged care system, we're up from 13 billion...

SABRA LANE:

And this question's about future. How prepared are you?

GREG HUNT:

Correct, we're up from 13 billion to approximately 20 billion now and it will go to 23 billion over the course of the forward estimates. But we recognise that the royal commissioners might well recommend additional resources and we are prepared for that.

So where the royal commissioners go, they have full freedom and they will make their own recommendations but we know that that may well involve further and additional resources and they are tasked with the job of making findings without fear, without favour about individual cases and the system.

SABRA LANE:

Just moving on to another issue. This strawberry scare, there are fears of copycat attacks now. Some supermarkets have issued blanket bans and taken all the fruit from the shelves. You've ordered an investigation, why?

GREG HUNT:

One of the reasons is that it's now beginning to look as if this is much broader than had initially been presumed. The police have done a tremendous job, I want to commend the police on what they've done.

SABRA LANE:

What you're doing.

GREG HUNT:

But what I have done is ask Food Standards Australia and New Zealand to investigate the supply chain to understand whether there are breaches in the supply chain which are systemic, to provide urgent and immediate advice to help protect Australians.

SABRA LANE:

Alright. Health Minister Greg Hunt, thank you very much for joining the program this morning.

GREG HUNT:

Thanks Sabra.

(ENDS)

Authorised by Greg Hunt MP, Liberal Party of Australia, Hastings, Victoria.