

Hon Sir ROGER DOUGLAS (ACT): I rise to support the Mental Health (Compulsory Assessment and Treatment) Amendment Bill being referred to a select committee. I do so not because I necessarily support all the detail of the bill; rather, I support the right of the patient—or, in this case, the right of the close relative—to know, except in the most exceptional circumstances. This, I believe, is a fundamental right and it needs to be widely debated. I think that it needs to be debated not just within the mental health area but within the total health system.

The fact is that important information is persistently withheld and concealed in the New Zealand medical market place. Why is this? The answer is simple. In the medical market place, people soon discover that it is in their own self-interest to withhold information. Why is this? It is because they do not view patients as the principal buyers of health care. Their principal customers are hospitals, physicians, Governments, and third-party institutions such as insurance companies, so they tend to serve them rather than serve the patients.

There is another reason why patients frequently do not have access to information on the quality of providers. Medical associations, physicians, hospitals, and Governments have made it difficult for patients to get information about quality. Avoiding quality comparisons has become almost a matter of professional ethics, as we saw at Wanganui Hospital. Doctors are reluctant to openly criticise the judgment of their colleagues, yet the price an individual pays for a wrong choice is much, much higher in respect of medical services. That information, including mental health information, is the key to avoiding these circumstances. We have to look only at this article in the Listener to understand the cost of these sorts of errors.

The most important conclusion that flows from the fact that the medical market place is complex is the necessity to create an institutional environment in which experts find it in their own self-interest to give all of us accurate information and good advice. Information, and how we provide it, is vital. The hope that some of these issues—as they relate not only, I would hope, to mental health but also to the wider health area—can be debated is the reason that I support this bill's referral to a select committee.