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SHADOW MINISTER FOR HEALTH
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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
DOORSTOP
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***SUBJECTS: Productivity Commission draft report on mental health;
private health insurance***

CHRIS BOWEN, SHADOW MINISTER FOR HEALTH: Well thanks for coming out today. I've got two issues to address.

Mental health care in Australia needs a revolution not an evolution. We need a sea change in how we deal with the issue of mental health. In that context I welcome the release of the Productivity Commission's draft report today. We welcomed and supported the Government's referral of mental health policy to the Productivity Commission. Obviously this is a draft report. It's not their final report. And obviously people will take their time as we will do to go through the report in some detail. But it is clearly a substantial report. It is clearly an important report. As I said we've given the Government bipartisan support on the referral to the Productivity Commission, on the appointment of a National Suicide Prevention Coordinator, on the zero suicide target. All these things are worthy goals.

What counts though is policy change. We will give the Government bipartisan support if we see substantial investment and change. If we don't we'll hold the Government to account for that. I've never doubted the Government's good intentions when it comes to mental health and suicide which of course are separate but related matters. But of course we also need to see substantial meat, substantial change. Government will quite rightly take its time to work through this report and wait for the final report. But this is an important day, an important marker in the mental health policy debate in Australia and we look forward to working with the Government to implement the final recommendations of the Productivity Commission when they come out should they receive the necessary support from the Government. And we will hold them

to account if there is not substantial reform.

The second matter I want to address is yet another report out today showing that the private health insurance system in Australia is broken. The Australian Medical Association no less saying that private health in Australia, private health insurance is and I quote "on the precipice". Well this is no surprise. People have known this for a long time. Australia's consumers know it. They're walking away from private health insurance. They're voting with their feet. Private health insurance policy needs to change as well. But we need a full and comprehensive review of private health insurance. Just as the Productivity Commission is doing with mental health so they could do with private health insurance. So they would have been doing right now if Labor were in office. Again I will welcome a referral to the Productivity Commission if Minister Hunt and the Treasurer were minded to do so. I would hope that they would. But clearly the band-aid approach they're taking to private health insurance is not working. Yesterday we had Choice pointing out that the gold-silver-bronze system which Minister Hunt is so proud of isn't working. Minister Hunt has previously said he's embarked on the biggest reforms of private health insurance in history and then he said he's going to have more to say. Well have more to say Minister Hunt. Do more when it comes to private health insurance and start with a full root and branch review.

Happy to take any questions on those or other matters.

JOURNALIST: Are you surprised by the findings of the draft Productivity Commission report?

BOWEN: Not really. We knew that the mental health challenge in Australia comes at a very considerable cost, not only to society of course but the economy as well. Hours lost in productivity. The costs of dealing with mental health too late. And I think, you know I don't want to paraphrase the Productivity Commission, but clearly they're saying early intervention is very important if all those costs escalate for the economy and even more importantly for society. So no I'm not surprised. But I very much welcome their contribution.

JOURNALIST: Do you think our mental health system as it stands is working?

BOWEN: Look I think we need a big change. I don't want to sort of comment on whether it's broken or not because there's good people working their guts out on the mental health system every single day. Mental health nurses, doctors, allied health professionals right across the system but they would be the first to say the system is straining under the pressure and that we need a very big change in the way mental health is approached.

JOURNALIST: And you just touched on it before, the costs of mental health on the economy. What more do you specifically think could be done to offset that?

BOWEN: Well I think the early intervention approach is worthwhile. I think obviously Federal and State Governments need to work together. I know that the Victorian Government has the Royal Commission into mental health as well and I'm sure that sensible people will be looking at both reports when they finalized as we will be going to ensure that we have real change in mental health policy in Australia.

JOURNALIST: Do you think the Government has the appetite to take on those Productivity Commission recommendations seriously?

BOWEN: Well that's not up to me to comment on. As I said I've never doubted the good faith bona fides of the Government when it comes to their intentions on mental illness. What I will hold them to account for though is if in due course there isn't real change. I'm not expecting them to respond to the report today. They shouldn't. They should take their time to work through it. They should wait for the final report. That's good and appropriate policy making. But if at the end of the day they don't adopt a stance of real and meaningful investment and change in mental health that'll be very disappointing and there will be a point of difference. And we'll hold him to account for that and we will have an alternative.

JOURNALIST: Do we need to lower the bar for people to seek medical assistance for mental health problems?

BOWEN: Well we do need more people seeing medical professionals to deal with their mental health challenges and the report today highlights how many Australians aren't getting that help. And again policy needs to consider that. Now there is access to 10 consultations a year for example and these things will need to be considered in terms of whether that's enough. But 60 per cent of GP visits have some mental health component to them and of course we would encourage all Australians who need help to be getting help and the key policy focus of the Productivity Commission is to encourage that and to encourage a policy change to ensure that this can be done.

JOURNALIST: Just on private health, is there anything you would encourage the Government now to act on to try and act on that crisis?

BOWEN: Get a review underway urgently. Urgently. I mean it would have been one of the first items of business of a Labor Government. We weren't able to implement our commitment for a review of private health insurance because we didn't win the election. But in politics when somebody sees a good idea on the other side they should embrace it and everybody knows private health

insurance is broken in Australia except it appears for Scott Morrison and Greg Hunt. Now again, I would implore them to hold a review and I'll welcome that if they do.

JOURNALIST: On another matter, do you think the Foreign Minister was wrong to say that China should be held to account on the matter of human rights abuses?

BOWEN: Look on an important relationship like the one with China there will always be points of difference and points of convergence. We have points of convergence with China on the economy for example. And there will be points of difference particularly as China has a very different system to ours and very different values in relation to their political system. It is right and proper that the Foreign Minister raises human rights issues both in China and anywhere else where it's an issue.

Sometimes I'm sure the Minister will be the first to say it's best done privately. Other times it's best done publicly. I have no quarrel with Marise Payne raising these issues. It is the job of an Australian Foreign Minister to raise concerns about human rights whether it be China or anywhere else and she will not receive any criticism from the Labor Party for doing so.

JOURNALIST: Is our relationship with China deteriorating by the day?

BOWEN: Well you know we've commented on the state of the relationship most recently I think by Richard Marles just a couple of weeks ago after his visit to China. We've said consistently that the relationship with China needs to be handled with nuance and with care and not be handled through the megaphone of Australian domestic politics. And you know sometimes the Government has fallen into that mistake. We will criticise the Government when they do and will praise the Government when they get it right as I've just done with Marise Payne. It is important that the relationship is in good working order. There will be points of difference and disagreements and they must be handled carefully. They must be handled sensitively. But Australia should always stand up for its values and its national best interests.

JOURNALIST: So do you think we should be treading more carefully perhaps with China?

BOWEN: Look we have to call out things that we need to say and that's why I'm not criticising Marise Payne. I will criticise sometimes when, you know we were critical of Andrew Hastie recently. He got it wrong. He was not nuanced. Marise Payne has a job to do representing Australia standing up not only for our national interests but also our values. And I think on this occasion she's done so

and she's done so appropriately.

JOURNALIST: Will there be more than just an inquiry into private health insurers considering what we've seen with the banking sector? Maybe a Royal Commission?

BOWEN: Look whatever form the inquiry takes. A Productivity Commission would in our view have been the best way of doing it. If the Government wants to a different way we won't quibble, just get on with a job and do a full independent review of the private health insurance system. Get on with it.

JOURNALIST: There's rumours starting to circulate that the Minister for Health Greg Hunt is going to step down at the end of the year. What do you say to that?

BOWEN: That's a matter for him to comment. I'm not here to comment on his career future. I just hope he gets on with the job, starts listing more medicines on the PBS, starts fixing private health insurance rebate and gets on with the job that he's been commissioned to do.

JOURNALIST: What do you make of your colleague Clare O'Neil, she's recently said that people, the progressive people in your party should stop treating people who don't have the same views as Labor as stupid. Do you think that's a fair call?

BOWEN: Clare's making a contribution to the debate about Labor policy which I think is welcome. And there's a number of people doing it. I'm giving a speech next week, the Keating Lecture where I'll be laying out a few thoughts as well. And I think that's a healthy thing, we came second in the election. It's a healthy thing early in the term for us to have some philosophical discussions. Now I haven't read all of Clare's speech yet but she's a very considerable and weighty contributor in our Caucus and her views should be taken into account. I don't think that the Labor Party has to face a choice between economic growth and looking after our traditional blue collar workers and improving the social fabric of the country. Traditionally the Labor Party has done both. We should also always do both with respect. And that's what we should continue to do.

Okay, all in all done. Thanks for coming out.

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