

CHILDHOOD CANCER AWARENESS MONTH

Statement

HON MATTHEW SWINBOURN (East Metropolitan) [5.38 pm]: Tonight, I will be giving a speech about a matter that is very personal to me and, in the course of that, I may refer to my copious notes because there are a number of very technical and specific pieces of information. The issue is one that relates to many children and families, and that is childhood cancer. September is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month. This is symbolised by a gold ribbon, which I am wearing today, as are many of my colleagues, and the hashtag “gogold”. In support of Childhood Cancer Awareness Month, public landmarks are often lit up in gold. In previous years, our state Parliament has been lit up. This year the Matagarup Bridge and Optus Stadium have both been lit up in gold.

I have spoken previously in this house about the sobering statistics on childhood cancer in Australia, and given that it is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month I think it is timely to speak about them again. These are some of the childhood cancer facts for Australia. It is estimated that 750 children aged between zero and 14 are diagnosed with cancer each year. One-third of Australian children diagnosed with cancer are diagnosed with a leukaemia-type cancer, while central nervous system tumours, typically brain tumours, account for 25 per cent of all diagnoses, and lymphomas account for a further 10 per cent. Almost half of all children diagnosed with cancer in Australia are aged four or younger when they are diagnosed. The incidence of childhood cancer in Australia increased by a staggering 35 per cent between 1983 and 2014. I think that we should reflect on that figure—a 35 per cent increase. That gives Australia the fifth highest rate amongst G20 countries. Sadly, on average, 101 children under the age of 15 will lose their fight against cancer every year. That number is even higher when we consider people with childhood cancers who make it to adulthood but who ultimately lose their battle. Tumours of the central nervous system—mainly brain tumours—account for the largest number of cancer deaths for children in Australia, followed by leukaemia and neuroblastoma. However, childhood cancer mortality rates have decreased by 39 per cent between 1998 and 2014. That is another figure worth reflecting on—a 39 per cent decrease in the mortality rate.

Despite having one of the highest incidences of childhood cancer in the developed world, Australia is estimated to have the lowest childhood cancer mortality rate among all G20 countries. Eighty-four per cent of children diagnosed with cancer in Australia between 2003 and 2012 survived for longer than five years, an increase from 79 per cent for children diagnosed between 1983 and 1992. Australia’s five-year relative survival rate is equal to or better than recent estimates in North America and Europe. Although there have been large improvements recently in survival rates for children diagnosed with leukaemia, lymphoma, neuroblastoma and malignant bone tumours, there has been little or no improvement in survival for several other childhood cancers, particularly hepatic tumours. Further, it is worth noting that even those who survive their fight often face lifelong health issues associated with their treatment. This can include cardiac, lung, digestive, hearing and vision problems. It can also include secondary cancers, growth and developmental problems, learning and memory issues, and problems with reproductive and sexual development. Further, it includes psychological problems, such as anxiety over medical treatments and hospital environments, depression and the fear that the cancer might return.

As bad as many of these facts seem, we have never been better at detecting, diagnosing and treating childhood cancers. It is worth remembering that we as Australians, including Western Australians, have access to one of the world’s best healthcare systems, and some of the world’s best doctors and treatments. Fifty years ago, only two per cent of children survived their cancer—it was, in effect, a death sentence. Now, around 80 per cent of children who develop cancer survive. Notwithstanding that, there is still a lack of safe, effective and affordable drugs to treat the most aggressive childhood cancers, such as some brain tumours. One of the main reasons for this is that childhood cancers are essentially rare cancers in the big scheme of things. This means it is less economically viable for pharmaceutical companies to search for its causes and develop drugs to treat them. There is far more profit in developing another cholesterol lowering drug for middle-age people than a cure for childhood cancer. However, we are fortunate that we have public and community-funded organisations that dedicate resources to researching cures and treatments for childhood cancers. This is largely the reason we have seen such significant improvements.

In Western Australia, this research has been led by the wonderful people at the Telethon Kids Institute—or TKI as it is known to its friends, and I count myself as one of its friends. TKI is co-located in its brand-new facilities at Perth Children’s Hospital. Originally known as the WA Research Institute for Child Health, the institute was established in the 1980s as a partnership between Princess Margaret Hospital and the University of Western Australia, and it worked hard to attract the best medical researchers from across the globe. The institute is a multidisciplinary unit, and is home to medical scientists, population scientists, clinical researchers and clinicians, all of whom are seeking to investigate the causes, prevention and management of childhood diseases and disabilities, including, but certainly not limited to, childhood cancers. It commenced its important work in 1990 under the leadership of Professor Fiona Stanley, and today is located in brand-new facilities.

The simple, but perfect motto of TKI is “Discover. Prevent. Cure.” TKI is, of course, supported by the state government in its activities. It is also supported by a great number of charitable organisations and foundations.

One of these charitable foundations is the Children's Leukaemia and Cancer Research Foundation Inc. I must disclose that I am a proudly paid-up member of this foundation, and I believe Hon Michael Mischin may be one too. For over 30 years the Children's Leukaemia and Cancer Research Foundation has been raising funds for research into childhood cancers. The foundation was created in the early 1980s after Peter Harper—whose nine-year-old daughter, Jennifer, was diagnosed with leukaemia in 1977—discovered that there was no research being done into children's leukaemia in Western Australia. He banded together with other parents of children with cancer and set about raising funds to create the CLCRF. Sadly, Jennifer passed away in 1978, but the work she inspired has delivered better outcomes for many children in Western Australia who have been diagnosed with childhood cancers.

What does the foundation do? Quite simply, it funds critical research into cures and treatments for childhood cancers. It does so in a manner to provide as much security and tenure for researchers as possible. The foundation also fundraises to increase the pool of money available for further research. It does this in several ways, including organising community events. These events not only fundraise, but also increase community awareness of childhood cancers. One such event is coming up, the CLCRF's Family Night Out featuring the Perth Symphony Orchestra. The PSO will be performing family favourites at Gloucester Park on Saturday, 9 November. There will, of course, be lots of other fun stuff, like bouncy castles and face painting, so get along there. Kids get free entry, while adult tickets are \$45, with proceeds from the event supporting the continuing work of the foundation.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend the work of the foundation, its board and the commitment of its dedicated and hardworking staff. Most importantly, I express my eternal gratitude towards their efforts to support the fight against childhood cancers. I would also like to acknowledge the organisers of Kai's Big Gold Ball. This event, held for the second time last Saturday night, was established by the parents of Kai to raise money for childhood cancer research. Kai, sadly, lost his fight against cancer, but his parents, Kara and Richard, have fought through their loss and grief to bring people together to celebrate his short life and to make a difference in the life of children with cancer, their families and support networks. You two both have my utmost respect and admiration.

To conclude, I hope everyone can join me in going gold this September to support Childhood Cancer Awareness Month. I encourage members to help raise awareness by wearing a ribbon, donating to a cancer charity, sharing social media posts, attending fundraisers and doing anything else they can to support this cause.

Finally, I would like to once again acknowledge all the children out there fighting cancer—you are and always will be my heroes. I also acknowledge those who gallantly lost their fight and got their angel wings. I also acknowledge the women and men who spend their lives treating and caring for our children with cancer. You really are the best people. To those super smart and dedicated people trying to find cures and better treatments, you are all champs and you have my eternal gratitude and admiration. Finally, I acknowledge those, like the Children's Leukaemia and Cancer Research Foundation, who do what they can to support those searching for cures and treatment. Thank you.

Members: Hear, hear!