

CHILDHOOD CANCER AWARENESS MONTH

Statement

HON MATTHEW SWINBOURN (East Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary) [5.30 pm]: Tonight I rise on the first day of spring, which also marks the start of Childhood Cancer Awareness Month. For members who have been in this chamber for a little while, and even perhaps for not so long, they will know that Childhood Cancer Awareness Month is special to me, and that every year that I have been a member of this chamber, I have stood to mark the occasion. The occasion of Childhood Cancer Awareness Month is obviously self-explanatory in its title, and today I wear the gold ribbon on my epaulet—I think that is what it is called—or collar.

The PRESIDENT: Lapel.

Hon MATTHEW SWINBOURN: Lapel—that is it! It was one of those words. This is the gold ribbon that symbolises childhood cancer awareness. Gold, generally, is also the colour for recognising childhood cancer and I think yellow, more broadly, for cancer.

Members might not know this, but in Australia this year it is estimated that 776 children aged between zero and 14 years, will be diagnosed with cancer, and, sadly, we estimate that 88 of those will lose their fight. That figure is way too high. Cancer is the highest cause of death amongst children in Australia and has been for a very long time. A couple of the only ways that we are able to change this is through, first, appropriate treatment and the availability of treatment, and, second, research into childhood cancers and potential cures. All childhood cancers are rare diseases because their prevalence in our society is fewer than one in 2 000. Childhood cancers, unfortunately, are very, very different in a lot of circumstances. What works in adults does not work in children and what adults are able to endure, children are not able to endure, and so we still remain stubbornly high in our 10 per cent death rate.

Most members will know that, unfortunately, childhood cancer is very personal to me. My son, Mitchell, was diagnosed when he was 10 with two tumours: one known as a paraganglioma and the other one known as a gastrointestinal stromal tumour. Those tumours were removed surgically when he was 10 years old, but, unfortunately, the GIST metastasised and progressed into his liver and lungs. Many members have met Mitchell. He is an exceptional young man. He is 17 now and is not currently undergoing any treatment. For him the options have always been only trials. He has not been able to have any conventional treatments because of the rarity of his condition, so we are always at the forefront of medical research when we start a new treatment. The last treatment was ineffective, and the impact on him personally and on his health was such that we stopped it. We are now waiting for those chemicals to clear out of his body and for the potential opportunity to start a new course of treatment that we hope—we always hope—will shrink the tumours and make them disappear.

We have been serviced and helped by the wonderful people at Perth Children's Hospital and its oncology ward. We talk a lot about our health system, and it has been in the media, but I will always hold that we have a world-class system that is the envy of almost everywhere else in the world, notwithstanding the issues that might exist. We only have to go to other parts of the world, including highly developed parts of the world, to understand how good we have it here. It is never that we should stop fighting for a better system or for greater improvements. We should always protect against backsliding on the level of care that we are able to provide our children and the rest of the community. However, our health system attracts some of the smartest people and some of the most passionate people in the world, and they do their darnedest to try to improve the wellbeing and lives of the children they care for.

Mitchell will be 18 in January next year. He will have to transition out of the children's hospital, notwithstanding that his cancers were childhood cancers. That is presenting its own degree of difficulty, and I would like to acknowledge my wife, who bears most of the responsibility for providing care to Mitchell and taking on the stress. Of course, during the COVID pandemic, the restrictions in the hospital mean that only one of us is able to attend hospital appointments with him. Once he becomes 18, the hospitals and the legal system change their views on the role of parents. For my wife, that might be very difficult because she will have to deal with a different situation, from one in which she has been able to take the primary responsibility for and stress of treatment decisions off Mitchell to one in which the system will place them on him. An area we could work on better is how we look after children who have to transition from our primary children's hospital into adult care. In other places in the world, some hospitals provide for children and young people in that in-between age. Mitchell will go from an environment where he is surrounded by people his own age to an environment where cancer patients are principally elderly, frail and completely unconnected to him. Having said that, we remain hopeful.

Across the month, I may be inspired to make more members' statements to raise awareness. I encourage all my parliamentary colleagues here to do their part—to “go gold”, as they say; to post or share information on their Facebook pages; and to make a donation to a childhood cancer charity. We have some fantastic cancer charities here. The Children's Leukaemia and Cancer Research Foundation is an organisation that was started over 30 years ago and has raised millions and millions of dollars to go directly into cancer research. We have excellent cancer researchers here, through the Telethon Kids Institute. As a state, we really have a right to be very proud of what

we do in this space. I acknowledge that we do not have the same economies of scale as Melbourne or other places around the world, but we still do a lot and we contribute our part. I encourage all members to go gold this month and support Childhood Cancer Awareness Month.

Members: Hear, hear!