

PHOENIX PROJECT, AUDIT REPORT

Statement by Minister for Health

MR R.C. KUCERA (Yokine - Minister for Health) [9.09 am]: A little over a month ago it came to my attention that there were some very serious concerns surrounding the way in which Phoenix used the taxpayer funds that were allocated to it. The Phoenix project was funded by the Department of Health through Family Planning Western Australia to provide much-needed health education services to Perth's sex workers. These workers are arguably the most vulnerable group in our community in terms of their exposure to detrimental health outcomes.

The contract for funding the Phoenix project was premised on -

outreach and in-house peer education, information and prevention programs on HIV, sexually transmitted disease and blood-borne viruses;

education for health professionals on issues affecting sex workers;

promotion and education resources and contacts with groups especially at risk;

liaison with key agencies in the development and implementation of services and policies for sex industry workers; and

overall service development through program evaluation, feedback on issues and trends in the sex industry and identification of gaps in service.

The recent spotlight on the Phoenix project and its use of public funds came by way of a publication that offered a "how-to" guide for sex workers to satisfy and keep regular customers. It can be extremely difficult as a non-health professional to judge where a line should be drawn in the use of health funds to provide an intended positive health outcome. It is not so difficult, however, to make that judgment when professional auditors provide substance for concerns. On becoming aware of the production of what could fairly be described as questionable material, I directed the Department of Health to undertake an audit of Phoenix. The objective of the audit was to ensure that government funds were being used for their proper purpose and that appropriate control processes were in place. I have now received the audit report in which it is concluded that there are a number of concerns regarding interpretation of contract output descriptions, and whether published material and Phoenix's advocacy work is in compliance with the aims of the contract. The audit also uncovered additional material prepared for sex workers that I consider both to be offensive and to have minimal health benefit.

As with every other of the hundreds of projects supported by the Department of Health, Phoenix was funded with precious health dollars to provide services. I deliberately use the term precious because every dollar spent in the health system is a dollar not spent on other equally important areas of government services. I understand, accept and in fact advocate the appropriate tailoring of important health messages so that they resonate among their target group. However, I cannot accept that in capturing the attention of a target group, the public's money is expended for broad industry lobbying. As a result of this, funding of the Phoenix project has been terminated and the Department of Health is currently engaged in sourcing an alternative for this component of what is a very important sexual health program.

I stress that non-government organisations and the projects they undertake are pivotal to the provision of comprehensive health services. These organisations are largely staffed by an incredibly committed and passionate group of workers who go above and beyond the call of duty on a daily basis. However, at the end of the day, these organisations are no different from our large tertiary hospitals, community health services and departmental divisions. They all have a job to do in the health system with money that comes out of the pockets of taxpayers.

Be it on this issue or any other, I make no apologies for decisions about the redirection of funds if it means a better health service for those who really need it. I will also make it very clear to my department that these contracts must be rigorously scrutinised to ensure they meet required health outcomes.