

## POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

### *Motion*

Resumed from 2 April on the following motion moved by Mr P.B. Watson —

That this house —

- (a) recognises the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder on Western Australians who have given service to the state and this country;
- (b) recognises and supports the need to raise awareness of the symptoms and effects of PTSD in the wider Western Australian community; and
- (c) formally declares the last Friday in June each year as “Invisible Wounds: PTSD Awareness Day” and encourages Western Australians to support events dedicated to marking this day.

**MR I.M. BRITZA (Morley)** [4.00 pm]: I rise to conclude my remarks on this excellent motion moved by the member for Albany. I realise that the women from the organisation that sought to bring the post-traumatic stress disorder issue before Parliament are not here, but they really need to be acknowledged.

**Mr P.B. Watson:** It was the Partners of Veterans Association of Australia.

**Mr I.M. BRITZA:** Thank you, member for Albany. They really are the silent sufferers in the community along with those who suffer from this disorder.

As I concluded my remarks last week, I spoke about spending a day with the Campbelltown police department’s forensic unit back in the mid-1990s. When I first arrived, only a group of six in that police department dealt with the forensic side of policing. Before I could even speak with them, they brought in about four photo albums and about four videos and told me to look through them before they came back at 12 for lunch. I opened the albums, and I really was not prepared for what I saw. They were full of photographs of homicides. The videos had been taken by the forensic unit. After I went through them, we all had a cup of tea and I started to ask questions of the forensic team about what I had seen. During the course of that afternoon some of the officers began to remark about incidents that had happened, sometimes 10 to 15 years ago, that none of their peers had heard them say anything at all about; they had kept things to themselves.

This is not the place to be too gruesome, but a young man with a young family told me about an experience he had. I think he had an 18-month-old girl at the time. A child had been killed by its mother and they could not find the child. They looked everywhere for it for several days and this young constable found the baby in the house oven in pieces, and his little girl was roughly the same age. As he was telling us this, he began to break down. I realised that, as did his team, he had never spoken about this. I remember leaving those men thinking to myself: if I ever have the opportunity to raise the issue of how these men are looked after or how they—I do not like the word “counselled” because it has a lot of negativity associated with it—get it out of their system, I will endeavour to do it. At that stage, university students with clipboards interviewed these seasoned police officers about what they had seen during the day. I came back to where I was, realising that this was a forensic department. They were not the first ones on the scene; these were the people who were given the call to get ready for the scene and to come down with their cameras. They were told information over the phone so that they could prepare themselves. These were not the young men and women, the constables, who came upon horrific scenes and had to deal with the aspects of that. I remember once again saying to myself: if I ever even get close to doing something about this, I will do it.

It was not long, nearly two years later, that an elderly woman who knew she had only a couple of months to live asked me to conduct her funeral. I did not know her personally, but I knew her son and daughter and a couple of her grandchildren. When I spoke to the son and the daughter and the grandchildren about their mum and grandma, it was horrific—they could not wait for the old girl to die. She was full of bitterness, anger and frustration. She was full of complaints; life had dealt her a hard blow. I went to her house realising that I would have to do eulogise this lady and I wanted to think of something nice to say, but the whole family was rejoicing that she was going. I sat down with her for what I thought would be about half an hour but it ended up being about two hours, and I found out she got married just before World War I and her husband fought in the trenches, where he was gassed. She was already pregnant with her first child and when he came back from the war, he was not the same young man who left. I do not want to bring the house into any disrepute by saying this, but he was willing to make babies but had no desire to be a father or a husband. He would retreat into the foetal position on his own. As she talked to me, she began to say things such as, “I don’t think he knew what he was doing. He would fly into a rage. My children never knew their father and I never knew my husband.” He was affected by the gas and all the effects of war and he eventually died in the late 1930s. This woman felt that life had passed her by and she had been dealt a bad blow. She was bitter about life and what had occurred to her.

There was no support back then and her husband was not being kindly thought of as a hero. Instead, he was remembered as a miserable husband and a miserable father, hence her hard and tyrant-like attitude in the home. All of a sudden I began to realise why she acted the way she did. I will never forget that at the funeral I said that everyone knew her as this angry and aggressive woman, but I began to talk about why she became this way and as I said this, I could see the change in her children and grandchildren; they got an understanding of why she was the way she was. I will never forget that experience because that was my first time speaking to someone who had to deal with a husband who had suffered terribly and had no hope. Not to bring any humour to a situation such as this, but I recall it being such a successful service that about five elderly women came up and asked me whether I would do their service! Therefore, I think it was good to listen to these people.

It was, many, many years later that I all of a sudden found myself a member of Parliament and a member of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee. The former member for Armadale, Alannah MacTiernan, was the chair, and I will not comment about her in the house, but I want to tell members that I learnt a lot from that woman as chair; I watched her keenly. Being a new member, I thought that we should not be too quick to get on to the next inquiry, but when the opportunity came I realised this was my time to bring before the committee the idea of looking at how our front-line services were looked after when they had dealt with fatalities or horrific scenes. We knew we had to really limit our terms of reference, otherwise they would envelop everybody. Although the terms of reference only included emergency services and front-line services, we could have included the armed services and we did not do so only because the terms of reference would then have been too great. We conducted an inquiry and it opened our eyes in a way that I never thought possible. We saw the results of Hurricane Katrina; we saw the results of 9/11; and we went to Christchurch and saw the results of the earthquake and the effect it had on families.

When the member for Albany moved this motion, and particularly when he talked about the men and women who had given their lives for the state and the country, I realised this was the perfect opportunity to support an issue that needs recognition from a community that just goes on with its life and does not understand it. Death is horrific and terrible for any family or individual and people are very supportive for about six weeks, and then after six weeks life goes on. Everyone goes on, but the person with the loss is usually sitting at home or trying to deal with life, and they are just forgotten because life goes on. I think it is the same for people who have suffered from this terrible disorder through those who are living with it. I feel that maybe I am like some other members who have spoken to women with husbands who have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. My brother-in-law fought in the Vietnam War. He was a forward scout and he would never even talk about what he saw, what he did or what he had to do. I am not even sure they were his words, but I know that whenever that issue came up, he became very quiet and very protective of those around him and his team.

I am honoured and delighted today to talk about this issue, but on the other hand, member for Albany, I feel the solemnity I think is due. Our society did not used to have the recognition of women that it does now. I despise the phrase “Suck it up, princess”, yet I feel that the community to a certain extent looked at these women and said, “Come on, get on with life. That has happened; now get on and get over it.” The fact is that this is not a disorder that someone can just get over and brush under the carpet. It is something that members of the armed forces have to deal with. They go on the battlefield, they come back and they do not get rid of what they have seen. I am thrilled and delighted to support this motion and I am extremely happy that our government supports this motion. In closing, however, I will move an amendment to the motion.

*Amendment to Motion*

**Mr I.M. BRITZA:** I move —

To delete the words after (c) and substitute —

formally declares the last Friday in May each year as a day to recognise and raise awareness of post-traumatic stress disorder.

I realise that there are lots of days possible, but I do not think this day should clash with any other.

**Mr P.B. Watson:** It could clash with my birthday!

**Mr I.M. BRITZA:** It could clash with the member’s birthday; May is a good month!

I believe sufferers of PTSD should have their day, and the Partners of Veterans Association is an organisation I want to be associated with. Along with other members, I want to play my part in supporting this cause and I wholeheartedly support the motion moved by the member for Albany. I thank him for bringing up this issue because it is something that needed to be done.

**MR M. MCGOWAN (Rockingham — Leader of the Opposition)** [4.15 pm]: I will just briefly comment. I thank the government for supporting the motion moved by the member for Albany, the shadow Minister for Veterans. I also thank the government for finding a more suitable day than the one that was originally suggested

by the state opposition—one that is agreed to by both sides of the house. I also thank members for their cooperation in supporting this motion and, in the main part, for the sensible, sensitive and well-researched speeches members made about this issue. I was one of those who made a contribution last week and I met the women from the Partners of Veterans Association who brought forward this issue. They were a fine group of women who had the interests of their husbands at heart in bringing this issue forward. Their husbands in the main part were Vietnam veterans who had suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. The wives indicated to us that some of them felt that as a consequence they had also suffered post-traumatic stress disorder through living with and experiencing the pain and ongoing mental health issues that their husbands had suffered. Of course, their husbands acquired this condition by service in the Australian Defence Force, predominantly in the Army, in the Vietnam War, and therefore there is a joint responsibility as a nation in relation to these issues. It was a good initiative of the member for Albany to listen to those women, to take their words to the house and seek the support of both sides for this initiative. I expect this initiative will now be taken up by other states and over time become a national event. Often, one Parliament starts something, another Parliament follows and pretty soon everyone is clamouring to jump aboard, and I expect that will be the ultimate outcome of what the member for Albany has commenced. Often, the footprint a member leaves during their parliamentary life is not necessarily large but this national footprint will be something that the member for Albany has left as a consequence of taking up this issue.

In closing, I thought there were some very interesting contributions made by people on the history of post-traumatic stress disorder and its former names over time—combat fatigue, neurological disorder, shell shock and the like. The contributions were interesting and informative, and when we raise this issue, we always think of those people who served in wartime, peacekeeping missions or other things, but, of course, there are also those others—the police officers, the ambulance officers, the people who might witness a traumatic tragic event, people who are victims of crime and the people who lose a loved one in traumatic circumstances. Those traumatic circumstances are unable to be coalesced into one group because they are so dramatic and so many. This event is about acknowledging all those people and the fact that there is a big group of people who might suffer an ongoing scar, illness or condition in their minds because of an event or a set of events that were beyond their control. As a Parliament, we are demonstrating to all those people that we acknowledge what they are going through and we want to see that acknowledgement transferred to the broader community nationally. Once again, I thank the member for Albany for his efforts.

**MR P.B. WATSON (Albany)** [4.20 pm]: I would like to thank everyone for their contributions to this motion, and I would like to thank the Minister for Veterans for his support in sorting out a day that could turn out to be my birthday! The first day we had would have been Red Nose Day; that was the day suggested by the ladies from the Partners of Veterans Association. I would like to thank the president, Sandra Cross, the secretary, Kerryn McDonnell, and the other ladies who came in—namely Gloria Fox, Jude Firth, Lynn Wesson and Ros Whitney. They gave an interesting aside to what we would normally think about post-traumatic stress disorder. They said they and their children suffer from it too because they live with it. Life can be very hard in their households, especially if —

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms L.L. Baker)**: Excuse me, member, are you speaking to the amendment at this point? I need to put the amendment if you are not speaking to it.

**Mr J.M. Francis**: I'm not going to take a point of order on relevance.

**Mr P.B. WATSON**: What would you prefer me to do; talk to the amendment first?

**The ACTING SPEAKER**: I will put the question, and you can talk to that if you want.

**Mr P.B. WATSON**: Okay. This side of the house supports the amendment to change the date to the last Friday in May.

Amendment put and passed.

*Motion, as Amended*

**MR P.B. WATSON (Albany)** [4.22 pm] — in reply: I would like to thank everyone who made a commitment to this last week. It is very, very important to the ladies of the Partners of Veterans Association. They had the courage to write to everyone in state and federal Parliament about it. Instead of sitting on their backsides and feeling sorry for themselves, they did something for not only themselves, but also for their husbands. It was funny; one of the ladies was saying she had had a terrible night because her husband was going to Vietnam—he had been there a couple of times. He said to her, “Well, have you organised me?” She said, “No, no, you have to organise yourself.” He said, “Okay, I have to be at the airport at 10 o'clock tonight”, and she said, “No, it's 12.” Those ladies are running their husbands' lives at the moment because the husbands do not have the confidence to do it themselves.

I will just read out some of the causes of PTSD: war or ongoing terror; living in a place with ongoing terror; being a refugee; being kidnapped; fire, flood or other natural disasters such as bushfires; a life-threatening illness; being beaten as a child; domestic violence; being beaten by anyone else; being held-up or threatened with a weapon; and rape or sexual abuse. There are also biological issues that include biochemical changes in the brain; a history of anxiety and/or depression with increased vulnerability; genetic vulnerability; psychological—a pre-existing mental disorder can influence the development of PTSD—a traumatic experience; and low self-esteem. The social issues that can trigger PTSD include: childhood experiences; exposure to war; family instability; and lack of support. The important message that every member of Parliament has to get out to their community is that treatment is available. There is psychological intervention and/or counselling, psychiatric treatment, medication, relaxation, mediation, education, and support groups to provide support and understanding to the individual, friends and family. These people are not alone, but they do not know that, and it is our job as members of Parliament, as stated in today's motion, to recognise the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder on Western Australians who have given service to this state and this country, recognise and support the need to raise awareness of symptoms and the effects of PTSD within the wider Western Australian community, formally declare the last Friday in May each year as "Invisible Wounds: PTSD Awareness Day", and encourage Western Australians to support events dedicated to marking this day.

As I said when I last spoke on this, it affects not only the people who come back from war, but also our firefighters, the emergency crews who go out on the roads and the police. I have a good relationship with our fire and emergency boys, and young kids join up and see some horrible things. In regional areas like mine, they can go out there and there will be a very good chance they will know the victim or the girlfriend of the victim. I have come across accidents driving along the road in our area and seen people I know. Members can imagine the sort of stress and counselling they need in situations like that. I also mention Hon Dave Grills from the upper house who spoke on this issue.

I know the Partners of Veterans Association will be very, very happy today. We were not quite sure whether this motion was going to get on today so they did not come along. I would like to congratulate everyone on all sides of the house. This is what Parliament is about. There is the biff and all that in question time, but we are here for a purpose; we are here to help people. We make laws, but we are human beings and we have to look after other human beings. I fully support this motion today.

Question (motion, as amended) put and passed.