

ELECTORATE OF PERTH, HOMELESS PEOPLE

Grievance

MR HYDE (Perth) [9.24 am]: I raise a grievance with the Minister for Health concerning the health needs of the homeless in the electorate of Perth. We seem to pigeonhole the term “homelessness” in our society. Homelessness is not just about housing; it is about people who have issues with their health - such as psychiatric needs - and people who have dealt with abuse - spousal abuse and abuse of children by their parents or relatives. Poverty and the lack of education are also underlying causes. All these problems come together and we end up with a situation which we term “homelessness”. We will not find people on the electoral roll termed as homeless in the central business district of my electorate; they will not be on the electoral roll in Kalgoorlie or other regional electorates. We need a partnership with the federal Government, with local governments and with service providers in our community. This issue is about priorities, and I commend this Government for its priorities. The Minister for Housing is looking for short-term accommodation that will not impact on the people we have inherited on the Homeswest waiting list. The Government is creating new, short-term accommodation to deal with some of these issues.

Yesterday I met with some members of the Noongar Patrol System, created by funding from the previous Government. I give the previous Minister for Local Government credence for providing community security funding under Safer WA for the officers in the Noongar patrol to get out and talk to people in their own language and understand their needs. It is great to identify people in need, but we must do something about the problem. I commend this Government for going a step further and dealing with the problem. It is about priorities. In my electorate, under the policies of the federal Government, there are you-beaut, wonderful, private hospital facilities in Mount Street. If someone needs a nose job or plastic surgery they can get straight in, without going onto a waiting list and their health needs are met. However, if a person does not have a Medicare card and has slipped through the cracks and is not part of the system, then getting appropriate medical attention for cuts, abuse or broken bones is not easy. This is an indictment of our society and I urge this Government and the Opposition in their deliberations to not become focused on issues such as a AAA credit rating. Sure, it is great that this Government has returned financial rigour and vigour to our accounts, but there is more to a caring and compassionate society than being able to crow to the rest of the world that we have a AAA rating under Moody's Investors Services. The fact that Western Australia has a AAA credit rating is no solace whatsoever to people who do not have a roof over their heads, to people who are queuing up and to people who are knocking on residents' doors asking for a blanket. This Government needs to act - and it needs to act now. We should make sure that there are caring and compassionate professionals on hand so that homeless people and people who have medical or psychiatric needs can receive attention and be directed somewhere, even if it is to somebody who will listen to their problems.

We should also look at the confidentiality of these issues. I am not ashamed of being a do-gooder in our society or of being called a do-gooder. When a number of us do-gooders turn up at Weld Square to deliver the nineteen-thousandth meal provided by Manna Ministries, we are humbled to know that in one of the most affluent areas in our State, in our country, and in the Southern Hemisphere, 80 or 90 people are queuing up each night to get a feed because society has let them down. Something has happened, and they do not have the means to feed themselves. That is an area to which we must give more attention. Homelessness is a tremendous problem that this Government and the previous Government inherited; it did not happen overnight on 10 February. It has been with us since capitalism arrived on these shores in 1829. We must act in a caring and compassionate manner. We must ensure that we do not provide a bandaid solution to this issue.

I am proud that the residents in my electorate of Perth do not want to sweep away the problem. The solution to homelessness, poverty, low-level crime, and lack of venues for kids on skate boards is not to sweep them next door to the seat of Nedlands now that it has a new member - it had a member in the Chamber yesterday. The problem can be solved by providing real and lasting solutions that will better society.

It is important to recognise this issue as a health issue. A whole-of-government approach must be taken under the leadership of one area of government. I urge the Minister for Health to take a leading role in this important area.

The SPEAKER: Before I give the call to the Minister for Health, I point out to all members who are present and those who are not, that having mobile phones switched on in this chamber is disorderly. Reluctantly, I call the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure to order for the first time.

MR KUCERA (Yokine - Minister for Health) [9.31 am]: I thank the member for Perth for his appropriate concern about health issues in the city. Having worked in the city and in Northbridge for many years, I am

aware that the city is a magnet to the less fortunate. Unlike some city fathers and other people, I agree with the member for Perth that this issue cannot be swept under the carpet.

Unfortunately, whether we like it or not, the homeless of our great city and the suburbs, those people who become unfortunate victims of the drug scourge and the young women who choose to work in the sex industry, come into the city. Whether we like it or not, they need the types of services that we expect as a right. The member's concerns are well-founded. I am pleased that in the past two weeks the Government has moved conclusively to assist some of the situations that have arisen. I acknowledge my predecessor's efforts - the member for Darling Range - to deal with the issues in the city. Those issues are above politics and must be dealt with. Two weeks ago, a major mental health facility in Northbridge was opened that will cater for young people and adults who suffer from depression, the ravages of mental health and the psychosis that comes from the scourge of drugs in our city. The service is discreet and confidential.

Yesterday, I was honoured to open the first of the mobile clinics that will operate in this city. I was honoured to launch an important initiative that will undoubtedly improve the health of all Western Australians, particularly those people who, for whatever reason, are homeless and disadvantaged and who frequent the city. Yesterday, the street doctor program was launched. It is an innovative pilot program that aims to provide a visible, easily accessible and non-judgmental mobile medical service to street-based populations in central Perth. As the Minister for Health, it made me extremely proud yesterday that this program, which is the first of its kind in Australia, is being pioneered in Perth, although other parts of the country may operate outreach services that target specific populations such as at-risk youth.

Yesterday morning I was pleased to be in Midland and inspect the bus that has been fitted out to provide a similar service to people in the Midland and hills area. The main aim of the street doctor program is to improve health outcomes and to reduce hospitalisation for a highly at-risk population. It is aimed at homeless and at-risk young people, older homeless people in the city, injecting drug users and those who work in the sex industry. Although the nature of homelessness makes it difficult to estimate their numbers, there are believed to be approximately 12 000 homeless people in the city. As we move through this era of economic rationalism people drop out from it and they are drawn to the city like a magnet. A number of those people suffer from substance and mental abuse. All of them are at risk of suffering from either illness or injury.

Research has shown that homeless people not only have a greater than normal incidence of medical problems, but also are reluctant to access existing health services. That was brought home clearly to me a few years ago when I was fortunate enough to start the school-based policing programs under which we talked to school nurses. One of the school nurses talked about the plight of young women - when I refer to young women, I refer to kids as young as 12 or 13 years of age - who either had sexually transmitted diseases, or were pregnant. Those young women were unable to access medical services either because they did not have the knowledge or were too frightened to access them. When I raised this matter with a group of people at a meeting in Perth, an irate woman asked me whether I had suggested that the Government bypass the parents. I told her that of course it would not. The street doctor program provides counselling to get young people to meet with their parents and other members of their families. What does a young woman of 12 or 13 years of age do when the father of her child is her father? How can she discuss that issue within her own family?

I was proud to open this service yesterday. The service is being provided by joint funding from the Commonwealth Government and the State Government, through the mental health division, and is ably supported by doctors from the general practice division of Perth. Many of them are giving their services essentially free of charge. Some of the burden for health will be shifted onto the federal Government through access to Medicare services.

Yesterday's experience showed me clearly that the power of one is still alive and well in this city. I was pleased to meet a young doctor called Noel Plumley, who introduced this service to Perth, and his partner Annette Alman. I also met a number of other doctors who will help provide this service. I am glad that Noel Plumley is a fellow fellow. Next month he will go to the United States as a fellow to examine the types of programs that are currently supplied in cities including New York.

Through the cooperation of the federal and state government health services, I am pleased to advise the member for Perth that a giant step forward was taken yesterday to make sure that the less advantaged people who are drawn to the city of Perth like a magnet have their health services catered for.