

SUSANNE WILLSHIRE — MULTIPLE CHEMICAL SENSITIVITY

Grievance

MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah) [9.16 am]: I rise this morning to grieve to the Minister for Education on behalf of a constituent of mine, Susanne Willshire, who is currently a departmental employee and who is in the gallery today. As the minister is well aware, I wrote to her in February this year highlighting the circumstances that Ms Willshire finds herself in. She suffers from a condition known as multiple chemical sensitivity. The condition described by Dr Mark Donohoe is as follows —

Multiple chemical sensitivities is an acquired condition in which the sufferer becomes sensitised or abnormally reactive to volatile chemicals following prolonged, recurrent or high dose exposure to volatile chemicals. The most distinctive symptom is “cacosmia”, or a heightened sensitivity and lowered threshold to odours that most of the population find inoffensive or would not notice.

There are a range of symptoms or outcomes of that sensitivity, including recurring symptoms and symptoms involving more than one organ system. Reactions and exacerbations are triggered by many chemically diverse substances. Reactions persist after separation of the person from the original causative agent. Reactions and exacerbations occur at very low exposure.

One of the problems is that I believe this condition has been met by the department over a long period with a varying degree of response. I think some good people in the department have understood the condition that Ms Willshire is experiencing, but, to be honest, there are also examples in which her condition has simply been dismissed.

In my letter to the minister in February this year, I attached a copy of a letter that Ms Willshire gave me, which I know the minister would have had a chance to read. It outlined the sorts of things that have occurred to her during her employment since 1994. It appears to me from the documentation that the multiple chemical sensitivity that Ms Willshire has, and continues to suffer from, has been exacerbated by some of the events in her employment with the department over that period. On occasions, Ms Willshire had been placed in a new workplace, yet, despite having alerted the Department of Education and Training staff that she has multiple chemical sensitivity, chemicals were sprayed. People who suffer from multiple chemical sensitivity find that unacceptable and it causes them to be unable to work in the workplace.

The reason that I raise this grievance with the Minister for Education today is that Ms Willshire has almost exhausted her sick leave and other leave with the department. In my view, there is a history in this case of a lack of genuine case management of her circumstances since she was diagnosed with multiple chemical sensitivity and reported to her employer that she suffered from it. That has been one of the problems. It has been up to Ms Willshire to attempt to contact the department over time to simply get information, which has been frustrating for her. It has been very difficult for her to get a genuine understanding from the department not only that this condition exists and is a genuine medical condition, but also of the impact it has had on her life.

I will go through some of those impacts because they are very important. I am talking about not only the physical impact, but also the lifestyle changes she has had to make as a result of her condition. Ms Willshire has had to move from the city because she can no longer live there. That has affected her relationships with her family members. She has been unable to care for family members either physically, financially or emotionally. It has had an impact on her personal life, her social life and her financial circumstances, and on her relations with her friends and family. It is a real problem that exists.

I will now get to the crux of her problem, which is her future employment with the Department of Education and Training in Western Australia. If she is to be terminated as an employee of the department because no safe workplace can be found for her, what are the implications for her and for the department? Will the department give her a payout or an acknowledgement of her condition? Ms Willshire has suffered a loss of income and her condition has had a direct impact on her family life. Her medical expenses are extensive and she has experienced pain and suffering and mental health issues from what she considers to be bullying over a 12-year period. There must be a recognition within the Australian Workplace Safety Standards Act that this condition is recognised as a workers' compensation disability. I plead with the minister to direct the department to genuinely find a solution to the circumstances in which Ms Willshire finds herself. I would appreciate it if the minister could spend five minutes after this grievance to meet Ms Willshire to better understand the impact that this condition has had on her employment with the Department of Education and Training.

DR E. CONSTABLE (Churchlands — Minister for Education) [9.23 am]: I thank the member for Mandurah for raising this grievance this morning. I am aware of the situation that Ms Willshire finds herself in, having read at length the letter that she wrote to the member for Mandurah and the letter that he sent to me in February. The letters outline in detail her multiple chemical sensitivity condition and the complications that have arisen due to

the condition that she has suffered. I sympathise with the very complicated situation that she is in. As the member pointed out, it has had an effect on not only her work within the Department of Education and Training, but also other aspects of her life. It cannot have been very pleasant for her. I am also aware of the many positions that she has been offered within the department since 2004. It is very unfortunate that none of those positions has been satisfactory to her. I will comment on that and outline the background to this matter.

Ms Willshire is a permanent level 2 public service administration assistant employed within the Department of Education and Training. Since 2004, as I read the detail of it, the department has committed to assisting Ms Willshire to return to full-time work. A lot of effort has gone into that, although it might not have been consistent. I think that the member for Mandurah implied that the effort has been inconsistent. A lot of attempts have been made over that time to help find work for Ms Willshire so that she could return to work. As I read it, there has been an extensive effort to provide an appropriate worksite that suits Ms Willshire's needs. It is very difficult to find an appropriate worksite for her because, as an administrative assistant, photocopying produces the types of chemicals that are a concern to her. Some might say that the efforts the department has made have gone far beyond what would be reasonably expected of an employer. Obviously, that is not her view and perhaps that is something we can talk about after this grievance.

As I said, the department is continuing to explore all reasonable workplace options to find a suitable work location for Ms Willshire, given the restrictions that her condition presents, of which there are many. This is not easy for anyone on either side. The department, for instance, has sourced and provided Ms Willshire with 15 alternative positions for her consideration since 26 February. I will give members an idea of the extent of those. In February, Ms Willshire was offered four positions in the staffing directorate, a position at Melville Senior High School, a position at John Curtin College of the Arts and a position at Port Kennedy Primary School. In April, Ms Willshire was offered a position in the staffing directorate, more than one position in the Shared Services Centre, a position in the office of the Director General of the Department of Education and Training, two positions in staffing and a position in curriculum support. In June, Ms Willshire was offered a position at Mandurah Senior College, which would be closer to home and would perhaps have been more suitable. Those 15 positions have been offered to Ms Willshire since February. The offers included worksite visits with officers of the department to assess the possible suitability within the limits of her condition and to discuss the potential for modifications to the work environment. A lot of effort has gone into trying to assist Ms Willshire. It is very unfortunate, but I am advised that Ms Willshire has declined all those positions as being unsuitable for her.

The nature of the restrictions that she requires makes it very difficult to find an appropriate replacement position for her using her skills as an administrative assistant. The restrictions are worth noting in some detail. They include no exposure to perfumes or cologne on colleagues; no exposure to paint or glue products in an office setting, particularly carpet glue of any age—there can be no carpet within her work environment; no exposure to new or near-new building materials or furniture, particularly carpet; no exposure to printers, photocopiers, faxes or office electrical equipment; no exposure to toners, printer cartridges or inks of any kind; no exposure to cleaning chemicals or garden products, such as fertilisers, pesticides, room sprays, insect sprays or any other airborne chemicals; no exposure to paper or paper products, including newsprint; and no exposure to cigarette smoke, engine exhaust fumes, tar or industrial air pollutant. That restricts the type of workplace that the department can find for Ms Willshire to work in.

I understand that Ms Willshire has now considered information provided by the department and has decided to express an interest in applying for voluntary severance. That has apparently progressed in the past few days. It would be appropriate to wait for the outcome of that process, as it may provide an agreeable solution for her. The Department of the Premier and Cabinet is considering that application. The department has an obligation to attempt to accommodate employees within reasonable limits. By and large, I believe that the department has done that in this case, although it may not have been as consistent as the member or Ms Willshire would have wished. Overall, I am satisfied that reasonable efforts have been made and continue to be made on her behalf. Having said that, because she has expressed an interest in applying for voluntary severance, we must now wait for that application to go forward. In the meantime, I will be more than happy to meet with her and the member to discuss the issues.