

GUARDIANSHIP AND ADMINISTRATION AMENDMENT (MEDICAL RESEARCH) BILL 2023

Second Reading

Resumed from earlier stage of the sitting.

MS M.J. HAMMAT (Mirrabooka — Parliamentary Secretary) [3.53 pm]: Before we broke for question time, I was making a contribution on the Guardianship and Administration Amendment (Medical Research) Bill and reflecting on the time that this bill was introduced—in the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was reflecting on what an unusual time that was, saying that a number of pieces of legislation and other actions taken by governments and others were unique. It was a very difficult time. I was also reflecting a bit on the importance of medical research across a wide range of disease and illness in advancing our knowledge and acknowledging some of the excellent medical research institutions that are based in Western Australia. I was reflecting on the importance of evidence-based approaches to finding cures and slowing down the progress of diseases. I was sharing some of the work that had been done by Princeton University in identifying some of the disinformation relating to coronavirus and some of the cures. I think I reported during my contribution that 243 different distinct storylines were identified, touting false cures, preventive measures and different diagnostic procedures, all of which were false and based on misinformation and not exactly reliable. Unfortunately, some of those also involved people profiting from that misinformation, peddling false cures and other things. I shared a few of the more interesting ones, reflecting on the role that the former President of the United States played. A range of old drugs were identified as having a potential role to play. I think I mentioned malaria medicines being repurposed, and all of this without sufficient underpinning evidence.

In different places around the world, cures were touted using aspirin. In India, a home remedy involved aspirin mixed with lemon juice and honey. People who have ever had a cold might endorse that kind of approach. I personally put a lot of faith in honey as a cure for sore throats and infections. I think the antibacterial properties of honey are backed up by science. There were lots of fake cures based on food, drink or absorbing things. Some of them are known to us as perhaps cures for colds. Garlic, ginger and chilli were all touted as having the capacity to prevent coronavirus infections. People in a couple of Middle Eastern countries—I will not mention which—believed that they would not have to worry about COVID because each evening they drank lemon and baking soda tea, which was seen as having a protective quality. It sounds like something we could clean the sink with, and I think there is some evidence to support its role in that, but I am not sure there has been much scrutiny of it as a cure for or prevention of COVID. Another country in the Middle East advocated drinking camel's urine with milk and honey and/or olive oil, all touted as cures. Sunbathing was touted as a possible cure in one of the African countries. Again, I think former President Trump was a chief purveyor of some of this misinformation when he talked about getting UV light into the body and how that could be effective.

As I said, some of these cures are harmless and if people tried them, they might be pleasant or unpleasant but not necessarily harmful in and of themselves. Clearly, if people were paying good money to access so-called cures or preventive remedies, that is not a good thing. One cure that was documented by Princeton University involved a celebrity radio host who was pitching for and selling nano silver toothpaste as a fake cure. There were various remedies, supplements and vitamins and, in some cases, even prayer books being touted as a way to bring about the end of COVID.

I know members in this chamber will appreciate the contribution from a German beer company.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Member, would you like a short extension of time?

Ms M.J. HAMMAT: Yes, a short extension.

[Member's time extended.]

Ms M.J. HAMMAT: Thank you, Acting Speaker. I had missed that. Perhaps that was part of the problem with the bells generally, or being enraptured by this contribution. Thank you for your assistance.

Members will be very interested to hear about the German beer company that promoted a beer festival, claiming that one of the beers could act as a form of oral vaccine. Members could imagine that would be incredibly popular. I am not sure whether they disclosed which beer it was or whether it required people who came to the festival to drink their way through all the beers to ensure they maximised their protection against COVID. Various other cures were touted as well. We laugh about them now because they are somewhat humorous. I think the point to be made is quite serious—that is, the important role played by medical research in finding cures, slowing down the progress of disease and making sure that we have an evidence-based understanding of how to protect the health and wellbeing of the population. Sometimes in the pursuit of that evidence base and that rigour and research, it is necessary to come to bills and arrangements like the one before the house, which has to strike a balance between being able to conduct that research and also being cognisant of the rights of people, particularly in this case when people might not be able to give their consent. It is very serious. Throughout history, a range of advances have occurred in medical science and research.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.