

**EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE INQUIRY —  
FLY IN, FLY OUT WORKERS — SUICIDES**

*Motion*

Resumed from 13 August on the following motion moved by Mr M. McGowan (Leader of the Opposition) —

That the Education and Health Standing Committee undertakes an urgent inquiry into the reasons behind the suicides of fly in, fly out workers—FIFO—and recommends initiatives that industry and government can take to reduce their prevalence.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms J.M. Freeman):** Member for Esperance—member for Eyre! I should know that!

**DR G.G. JACOBS (Eyre)** [4.00 pm]: It does not really seem to matter whether we have been on the same committee in education and health for a little while now, Madam Acting Speaker; I am still not known by you as the member for Eyre!

**Mr P.B. Watson:** As long as there's not two of you!

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** I often say in this place, member for Albany, that the people of Esperance would be very happy to have their own member, but they have to share me between Ravensthorpe, Southern Cross, bits of Boulder and Eucla, on the South Australian border!

I thank the Acting Speaker for the opportunity to speak to this motion, which is a very important motion on a very important subject. The first time I was made aware of Parliament potentially considering this motion was the Sunday before last. I was having a morning coffee in the local McDonald's McCafe, and my wife was reading *The Sunday Times*. She said, "Here's your name. Well, it's not actually your name, it's just 'the member for Eyre'". A previous customer had torn out the article on the other side of the page so all I could see was "the member for Eyre", but I did not know what the article was actually about. Kathryn said, "Don't worry, we'll buy our own copy of *The Sunday Times* on the way home," which we did. I then read the full article about this very issue—suicides amongst fly in, fly out workers. As it turns out, this issue has come into this place as a motion, and as I reminded the Leader of the Opposition, it could have gone through a different process. He could, as many people do, have written to me as the Chairman of the Education and Health Standing Committee to consider this particular subject. Be that as it may, the subject has presented itself in the form of a motion. I foreshadow that, a little later in my speech, I will amend this motion in a quite minor way; the opposition has a copy of that amendment after I gave it to the opposition Whip, and we considered the amendment in committee this morning.

In the week and a half after reading that article I was contacted via email, and I would like to share the email with the house. It highlighted to me and to members of the committee how important this subject is. I have permission from the person who sent it to quote the email. It reads —

Dear Graham;

My name is John Migas (aged 29) and I'm writing on behalf of my family in the hope that the government will commit to a genuine investigation into the spate of FIFO suicides. My brother Stephen Migas (aged 36) took his life last November after having worked in FIFO for close to 8 years. By no means do we blame FIFO or his employer for his suicide but we feel as though some measures could be taken to help prevent other suicides and more families from going through what we've had to go through in the last 9 months.

With 9 reported suicides over the last 12 months there is clearly a problem that needs to be addressed. Knowing that there are 50,000 workers currently doing the FIFO lifestyle, this makes it close to double the national suicide rate of 11 in 100,000 per 12 months (as seen on the Life Line website). These are just the ones that have been reported on so there is a good chance that it could possibly be more.

As a community we need to understand that when suffering depression and doing FIFO you are separated from key support people that you would usually draw on to cope with difficult times (family, friends and partners). Add to this, is the fact you're not able to access any of the normal things you would do or enjoy. Given that workers can't go home at the end of their shift, there is need for companies to raise awareness/provide support/do more outreach to promote the health and well-being of those on-site. Ultimately, people are responsible for their own lives but if the working environment erodes your ability to think/behave as you would normally, special provisions need to be made to off-set that. We're not asking for them to have a pay rise, we're just asking that the government look into a solution to help lower the current FIFO suicide rate which will also lower the national suicide rate. Depression is an illness, not a choice.

**Extract from Hansard**

[ASSEMBLY — Wednesday, 20 August 2014]

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I found out about my brothers suicide via a text message from one of our friends who worked up north with him. There is no easy way to pass on the news of a family member's suicide but there should be a strict protocol in place for when these circumstances do arise, as finding out through text is unacceptable. My family and I will never be the same and this enquiry won't help us, we only know the pain and suffering and will do what we can to share our story to help prevent other families from going through the same thing.

Regards,

John gave me permission to read that letter this afternoon because he said that he would welcome anything that could make a difference for other families.

I want to talk a little about some of the work that is currently being done, because I think it is important, so that we as a committee can focus on filling in the gaps. I refer now to Lifeline WA's oft-quoted "FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Research Report 2013", which is fairly comprehensive. It includes a survey of 924 FIFO and drive in, drive out workers, and qualitative interviews with 18 FIFO workers. The report states that one in five workers claim their industry does not have an onsite mental health counselling facility, and one in 10 says that their industry does not have an employee assistance program. It also states that a significant number of FIFO workers are not likely to make use of any mode of mental health information or service, and that workers employed under high-compression rosters—that is, long work shifts and multiple consecutive days on site—are prone to higher stress than other workers, particularly if they are partnered. High-compression rosters produce a lot of stress within a relationship, with the FIFO worker not being around. This would apply to workers with children as well. The findings in the Lifeline WA report show that stress generally increases during shift rotation and was also reported at higher levels in the days leading up to leaving for work compared with workers on lower compression rosters who are single.

**Mr D.A. Templeman:** When was that report?

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** It is Lifeline WA's "FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Research Report 2013".

The report shows that workers with no children reported lower levels of stress upon returning home compared with workers who have children. The qualitative work from this Lifeline WA research report shows that the number one stress of FIFO workers was family/home separation, and a significant dimension of stress and family/home separation relates to FIFO rosters, as longer periods at work are more stressful, particularly for workers with young children.

Other studies have been conducted in and around this space. The University of South Australia carried out a survey of mining workers and their partners to support a PhD thesis in its school of psychology. The preliminary findings were that rates of depression were twice as high as those found in the general population, conflict with partners was higher, and there was a higher incidence of sleep problems and other health problems, including gastrointestinal issues. It is interesting that the WA Chamber of Minerals and Industry rejected these findings and suggested that mental health problems among FIFO workers were significantly lower than the case in other employment types. A study was done at the University of Queensland that referred to rates of depression. It surveyed 293 workers, which is quite a significant number. It showed that for 75 per cent of respondents who were employed in professional and technical roles, such as geologists, engineers or senior management, the rates of depression, anxiety and stress were lower than was the case for the general population. The survey showed that sleep disturbance was a common problem, with 70 per cent of respondents reporting some level of disturbance; 60 per cent agreeing that job demands interfered with family life; and 54 per cent reported feeling lonely or socially isolated to some degree. I am sure that many members would agree that our job demands interfere with our family life.

Just to complete the picture, the Australasian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health has developed a roadmap for mental health in the mining and resources sector. It suggests that one in three workers in the mining resources industry will experience a mental illness in any given year, and, furthermore, in any 12-hour shift a person with mental illness would be unproductive for an average of two hours and 42 minutes.

In light of this information, we are considering this motion brought on by the opposition. I do not want to change the intent or sentiment of the opposition's motion, and I will explain why I propose an amendment to this motion in a moment.

*Amendment to Motion*

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** I move —

To delete all words after "Committee" and insert —

be respectfully requested to inquire into suicides of FIFO workers in Western Australia. The committee will determine and inform the house of its terms of reference on 21 August 2014 and present to the house a preliminary report by the end of 2014 and its final report on 5 March 2015.

This amendment will in no way change the intent of the motion and adheres to the urgency contained in the original motion. Members of the Education and Health Standing Committee have considered today how we can best do that and the best time frame for the inquiry. We do not want this inquiry to be protracted. We believe it is urgent enough to give the house a preliminary report by the end of this parliamentary sitting year, and to produce our final report by 5 March 2015, which would be the first Thursday that we come back to Parliament in the 2015 session of Parliament.

The committee's original proposal for an inquiry was to look at the coronial aspects of each of the deaths; however, committee members did not believe that was their role, and that it was the role of the State Coroner and other agencies. However, the committee felt it was very important to recognise that the house would want it to look at some of the systemic issues in and around this very important matter. As I said, the committee had a very good meeting this morning to consider the motion. We could all see that this was a bipartisan issue and not one in which we would play politics. It is really important also that we recognise that we want to make a difference. A lot of us understand the issues. Almost all of us have FIFO workers in our electorates and we recognise some of the stress factors and risks. These issues are important. But it is also important that we look at the current initiatives that are employed by government, industry, and, to use another member's terminology, "the wider community". We need to look at the responsibilities of employees and employers, and what legislative policies could be implemented to make a difference in the treatment of mental illness and the suicide rate among FIFO workers, particularly from depression. This will not necessarily be an easy inquiry, but the committee believes it is important enough that we put our energies into it immediately. We were also considering some other issues in and around mental illness—I am not breaching the confidentiality of the committee here—and how we deliver assistance to young people. We thought that also was really important. We have had a preliminary look at that issue but we believe this issue is as important. It is a priority given that an urgent inquiry was sought in the original motion.

As members know, we have worked quite hard on some of the terms of reference. I give an undertaking that we will present them to Parliament tomorrow. We believe we needed to do that because we did not want to wait another two weeks to compile the terms of reference in the two weeks after we come back. We will have then lost another two weeks. We thought it was important we proceed with this. I thank Mat and Daniel for the work they have done. They have jumped on board with this. We will, hopefully, hit the ground running. All the members of the committee recognise the importance of this issue. I commend my amendment to the house. I hope the opposition will see that we have not—I was going to say "doctored it"—watered it down. I think we have made it a little clearer. It says it as it is; that is, we seek an inquiry into suicide among fly in, fly out workers.

**MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah)** [4.21 pm]: I have spoken on the substantive motion and now I am speaking on the amendment moved by the member for Eyre. We will support the amendment to the substantive motion, which was moved last week when debate commenced in this place.

I thank the Education and Health and Standing Committee members for their consideration of the intent of the original motion. We have no problem with its rewording via the amendment, so we will support it. I also appreciate the urgency the members of that committee are giving to this inquiry in that the chair will present to the house tomorrow the terms of reference. The committee intends to provide a preliminary report by the end of this year and to report in early 2015, bearing in mind the opposition is keen not to prolong debate on this motion because we would like to move onto the privatisation of the TAB motion by 5.00 pm.

In support of this amendment and the thrust of the motion, I want to point out a couple of important things that have occurred since last week, when the debate was initiated, and talk about feedback from the community. The member for Eyre has highlighted some important studies into the impacts of fly in, fly out life on families and working men and women who are directly involved in the FIFO phenomenon. I want to highlight to the house the reaction from my community to the Leader of the Opposition's announcement about the need for an inquiry. I will quote from last Thursday's *Mandurah Mail* in which opposition leader Mark McGowan's call for an inquiry into the suicide rates among fly in, fly out workers has been welcomed by a Halls Head woman who has felt the devastating effects a FIFO lifestyle can have. She lives in Halls Head, which is in the member for Dawesville's electorate, but of course, Halls Head is in the City of Mandurah. It reads —

Jodi Paterson's partner James Dowdell had worked as a FIFO worker for more than 10 years when he died on December 27 last year.

**Extract from *Hansard***

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The father-of-two had suffered with depression and had been advocating for more mental health support for FIFO employees.

“He was passionate about getting someone out there onto the mines getting to know the workers, having a chat to them and providing some support,” she said.

“He would say that he was doing the job to provide for his boys, but he hated not being here and not being able to make those memories.”

At least nine FIFO workers have taken their own lives in the past year, prompting ... Mr McGowan to announce a push for a parliamentary inquiry ...

Further to that story, the article states —

Last year 25-year-old West Australian Rhys Connor took his own life, leaving a suicide note that said people “don’t know what it’s like to work FIFO and have depression”.

Ms Paterson said she spoke with Mr Connor’s mother, Anita.

“I know Anita and I spoke to her,” Ms Paterson said.

“We both said it’s about making change, and the way to do that is to get the companies to change the environment there.

“If we had depression we could go and seek help; there are the resources to do that.

“But on sites there just aren’t; there is no recognition of mental health.

“I can’t bring Jim back, but we can make a change so families don’t look back and say ‘I wish we could have done something more’.”

Since Mr Dowdell’s death Ms Paterson has been a fierce advocate for FIFO workers and their families, calling for more Government funding for mental health support both on and off the job.

The article also contains a quote from Hon Helen Morton, the Minister for Mental Health.

I want to highlight to the member for Eyre and the other members of the Education and Health Standing Committee—it will be a very good submission—that I will encourage Jodie Paterson, who I have quoted in that article, to formally submit the paper she wrote titled “Fixing FIFO and why it needs fixing”. In her paper Jodie goes through the various demands and aspects that a FIFO lifestyle has for workers and their families. She works through the impact of shiftwork, physical health effects, sleep and mental health, FIFO and depression, and alcohol and drugs in the Australian workplace. She then highlights a number of risk factors from her perspective about those who work in the resources industry, particularly, as they affect people who are part of FIFO families. She has included a section on new and emerging drugs. She then goes into detail about how we should approach the problem and she addresses issues such as family breakdowns and separations. She talks about turnover in the industry—the pressures of turnover and the uncertainty of ongoing employment—and the issue of rosters, which is a big issue. She then highlights, essentially, what she believes FIFO families are seeking. I commend to the member for Eyre and his committee this paper. I will make a copy available to him.

I will encourage people such as Jodie Paterson to make submissions or attend hearings in whatever way the committee chooses to carry out the inquiry so that the committee hears from the coalface—for want of a better term—from families and partners of loved ones who work in the industry and maybe even professionals who work with families, such as teachers. I think we need to look very carefully in a holistic way at the issues on this. I will not speak any longer because I know we want to bring this to a vote around 5.00 pm. I am not sure whether any opposition or any government members will speak, but as per the agreement, we would like to make sure we fit within that realm so we can get onto the privatisation of the TAB. The opposition would appreciate that timing.

**MR P. ABETZ (Southern River)** [4.29 pm]: I stand in support of the member for Eyre’s motion and the amendment. FIFO is an interesting development that has taken place in our community. In Western Australia, about a thousand people are working in the resources sector and apparently about 60 per cent of them are FIFO workers. In one of the schools in my electorate, the principal told me that one out of every four dads is a FIFO worker. FIFO workers are also very big in migrant communities, particularly people from South Africa, Britain and India, who have mining expertise and who have come to Australia on a 457 visa and are settling in. I think doing FIFO work presents a special challenge for migrant families because they do not have the supportive family network around them, and yet many of these families in my electorate with whom I have spoken highly value that the FIFO lifestyle enables them to earn a higher income, which enables them to get established in this country more quickly by purchasing their own home and so on.

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Another interesting thing that is often mentioned to me, particularly by the dads, is that when they were working in Perth, they were leaving for work at seven in the morning and coming home at six o'clock in the evening or later, and therefore they hardly got to see their kids except during the weekend. The FIFO workers, especially those who are rostered for two weeks on and two weeks off, love it because when they are at home, they can engage in a very significant way in the lives of their children, which is certainly something that is very positive.

According to my notes, the Chamber of Minerals and Energy of Western Australia stated in its 2012 report that it expects that the demand for the FIFO workforce within Australia to double within five years. Whether or not that will actually happen remains to be seen. It is really important that the inquiry that is mooted look at the question of perception and what actually is happening.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms J.M. Freeman):** Order, members!

**Mr P. ABETZ:** We do not actually know whether the higher rate of suicide among FIFO workers is because of the FIFO work per se, given that I have also met people who have gone into FIFO work —

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Members! You might want to consider that it is one of your own members who is speaking when you are making that rumble over in the corner. If you want to continue your discussion, perhaps you should do it outside the chamber.

**Mr P. ABETZ:** There are quite a number of FIFO workers in my electorate. When I was doorknocking in the lead-up to the last election, one of the things some of the FIFO guys who were at home said was that they do FIFO work because things are not so good at home and that it is a way of getting away from the Mrs and kind of keeping the peace, to some extent. I think the FIFO lifestyle will only exacerbate rather than help people who go into FIFO with that type of relationship problem.

Having served as a pastor for many years in my congregation, my experience of working with FIFO families was that the families with strong family ties—that is, the husband and wife relationship was strong and the mums were coping well looking after the kids and so on—handled the FIFO lifestyle quite well. With support from within the community, the FIFO lifestyle can be a very positive thing. Perhaps there is a need for further research from PhD students or professors, but I would hope that the inquiry will also be able to determine to what extent the suicide rate is in fact higher than the general population among FIFO workers because of the FIFO lifestyle or whether other factors are involved, such as what is attracting people to FIFO work. For example, we know that people in the building construction industry have a much higher suicide rate than people in other sectors of the community. The issue of suicide is very important because suicides are overtaking the road toll as a cause of death. Approximately 2 300 Australians take their life every year, but only—when I say “only”, I do not mean that in a negative way—1 500 people die in road accidents. It is still 1 500 people too many, but given the size of the issue, we are all aware of just how important it is to get the road safety message out and so on. We need to make sure that this inquiry addresses not only the FIFO aspect, but also hopefully some of the broader benefits that will flow from that as well for FIFO workers.

Another interesting thing is the high suicide rate in Australia for males in the 15 to about 35 age group, which is very highly represented in the FIFO workforce. It will be interesting to look at some of those figures. I would also hope that the members of the Education and Health Standing Committee will have a close look at the research arising from the inquiry that the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia has been doing on FIFO and drive in, drive out workers in regional Australia. The House of Representatives inquiry received various pieces of evidence that make it clear that policymakers, service providers and communities need to be aware of not only the downsides of the FIFO lifestyle, but also the positive aspects. Unsurprisingly, there has been a real focus on the possible links between FIFO work and suicide, but despite the intense interest in and often heated public debate on the issue it seems that very little scientific research has been done about whether there is a causal connection between FIFO workers and the suicide rate. One would hope that the inquiry may be able to shed some light on that.

I am cognisant that a couple of other members want to speak on the subject, but I want to highlight that the strong family relationships would appear to be a protective factor against suicide. That applies in the general community and it certainly applies also in the FIFO setting. I believe that anything we can do to strengthen the family ties within our community of FIFO workers and the wider community will also be very helpful. We know that family conflict and family breakdown very much increases the rate of suicide. If we can keep our families working harmoniously together, we certainly will reduce the rate of suicide.

I am hopeful this inquiry will look at the types of rosters used on worksites. When I was on a familiarisation tour of Fortescue Metals Group mines in the Pilbara, I spent about half an hour on one of the machines with one of the workers and I asked him how he found doing FIFO work. He said that he had worked for other mining companies but that he loved the FMG roster, that it was brilliant and that he would not take any other job given that it allowed him much more time with his family than if he had a job in Perth. He said that he and his family

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loved it and that FMG, according to him—I am not sure whether or not he is right—has a much lower staff turnover because of the much more family friendly roster system. I think that is something definitely worth looking at.

**Mr J. Norberger** interjected.

**Mr P. ABETZ:** I cannot recall; he did tell me at the time, but I cannot recall exactly what it was. I am just hopeful that this inquiry will shed some light on the situation to help keep families happy and healthy because I am sure that is what all of us would want.

**MR J. NORBERGER (Joondalup)** [4.39 pm]: I really appreciate the opportunity to briefly add my support to the amendment, and in keeping with the wishes of members opposite to move on to another matter of private members' business, I will be as brief as I possibly can. It is obviously a worthy discussion. I have no doubt that the Education and Health Standing Committee will do a good job on this matter. There are some very experienced and long-serving members of Parliament on that committee. That said, I think it will be a difficult inquiry, and the only reason I say that is that it is a very complex area to be looking into. However, if the committee can come up with some recommendations, strategies and ideas, all it has to do is save one's person's life and I would suggest it has already been worthwhile. I wish the committee all the best.

I want to spend a few minutes sharing some of my own experiences, which may hopefully be beneficial for the committee to consider in its deliberations as it undertakes the inquiry. Prior to joining Parliament I was the general manager of a mining training and recruitment business based in Joondalup for almost six years. For that entire time I was the general manager of a business that actually recruited and trained people in the mining industry. We held contracts for just under 100 workers employed by us, with labour hired to a variety of contracting companies on the mines, and the majority of our employees were, in fact, Indigenous. About half of those were Noongar people and the other half were Kariyarra—if my pronunciation is wrong, member for Kimberley, I apologise—and Martu people. We were dealing with our very own employees, who were exposed to the fly in, fly out lifestyle and, it could be argued, were in an even higher risk category, unfortunately, because they were Indigenous. I do not claim to have all the answers and I do not have a medical or a psychology degree, but I thought I would share a few observations I was able to attain in those years as someone whose own staff was exposed to the FIFO lifestyle.

To continue ever so briefly, I think the member for Mandurah mentioned FIFO in this context as a phenomenon. I believe that the member is quite right, because if we look at places around the world where mining takes place, there are very few that rely on a FIFO workforce. I am not suggesting Western Australia is the only place, but I would hazard a guess that it is probably the most prominent geographical location that has a FIFO workforce that I am aware of, because of the make-up of our state, the distances to the mines and Perth being the main metropolitan centre. Certainly, in the United States, we would generally find that where there is a mine there is also a township or a settlement very nearby and generally the workers who work on those mines live nearby. I suppose it could be argued that Kalgoorlie is also an example of where that is the case. It would be interesting for the committee to ascertain whether the suicide rate in Kalgoorlie of people who work in the resources and construction industry is any different from those working in the Pilbara. Again, I have to shorten my speech so I do not go over my time limit.

Rosters were mentioned and I have no doubt that the committee will look at rosters. It is may be worth mentioning that rosters have universally come down significantly over the last 10, 20 and 25 years. It was certainly before my time in the industry, but some of the people I employed as trainers who had been in the industry for a long time talked about rosters under which they were away for 13 weeks at a time with two or three weeks off. That is almost unheard of now. I do not know what kind of statistical information is available to the committee, but it would be interesting to see what the suicide rate was when those rosters were in place. We are now getting to a point at which the rosters are getting better. The member for Southern River mentioned Fortescue Metals Group, with a roster of eight days on, six days off, which is generally referred to as an even-time roster. It was a very strategic decision by Fortescue to introduce that roster when it started the Cloudbreak mine, with which my company had a fair bit of involvement back in 2007. Fortescue was trying to open up a very, very significant mining operation in a very short time, something that the likes of BHP Billiton or Rio Tinto generally do over a longer time. In order to attract more qualified staff, it quite deliberately, in a competitive sense, offered an eight days on, six days off roster, whereas BHP and Rio were offering two weeks on, one week off. Fortescue was very successful and it attracted a whole lot of people to help start Cloudbreak. A lot of those people came to my organisation for their induction training as I had a contract for doing Fortescue's induction training. When they came to us, they had not even been issued with their Fortescue uniforms yet, so they all showed up the uniforms of their most previous employers. It was quite funny, because it was almost like statistical analysis of where they came from. There were the Rio Tinto shirts, BHP shirts,

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Minara Resources and the like. There is an element of competitiveness between some of the mining companies, obviously as part of their desire to attract staff, and they have improved the rosters. However, as I am sure the committee is either already aware or will become aware, that there is a construction workforce doing fly in, fly out work, such as that at Barrow Island or on some of the mine expansion projects. Let us not forget that in sheer volume of numbers, that construction workforce actually by far outnumbers that of the operational mining workers. In the Pilbara they tend to have rosters that are still four weeks on, one week off, so obviously compared to eight days on, six days off, it is a bit harsher, and they do day shifts and night shifts. Sometimes, although the camps they are in still have mod cons, because they are construction camps, they are not as established as those later on down the track when a mine becomes operational. That might be just something for the committee to look into.

Very quickly, there are two things I want to share with the house, given that a number of committee members are here. I realise from the comments made by the chairman of the committee, the member for Eyre, that, to a degree, there is an element of not getting bogged down in the reasons behind the suicides. I believe that to a certain degree we cannot extract ourselves from those. There will be a need to look at some of the underlying reasons for suicide if we are to make some recommendations. A lot of the potential reasons have already been canvassed and I do not intend to repeat them. There are probably two I became aware of with my own workforce, which I think are probably slightly more distinct and do not always get attention in the media. The first one—it probably is the most important of the two, so if I run out of time it is maybe the only one I will share—is people's sense of becoming trapped in the FIFO lifestyle. On a number of occasions people would come to me, because they saw us as a recruitment company, with wonderful plans and a desire to go into FIFO work for maybe just one, two or three years. They had all the best intentions in the world. They wanted to pay off a big chunk of the mortgage or save up a certain amount of money for their children's education. However, knowing that the lifestyle was potentially not the most conducive to family life or that there would be some challenges with it, they had a very clear idea that they wanted to do FIFO work for only a limited time. What we then found in many instances was that people going into the FIFO lifestyle obviously earned a whole lot more money. Their income was very high and it was possible that their lifestyle adjusted to the higher income. They went on a holiday that they had never had the chance to go on previously, they bought a boat to give themselves a bit of a treat or they took on a larger mortgage and whatnot. Even with some of my staff I found that two or three years in, there was a genuine desire, from a lifestyle point of view, to go back to working in Perth. They wanted to come back and work from Monday to Friday, but the cut in pay they would incur was so much that they more or less felt trapped because of their adjusted financial commitments and lifestyle expectations. In one of the examples read out earlier by another member, one of the gentlemen who committed suicide mentioned that he was doing FIFO work for the betterment of his children and, obviously, that would have been a very compelling reason to continue that lifestyle.

I had instances in which trainers on a FIFO roster were working for me. I was paying them between \$160 000 to \$180 000 a year. They would come and ask to work with Richards Mining Services back in the Joondalup office or the Wangara office because they wanted to get back to their family as they did not enjoy the lifestyle anymore. I said that that would not be a problem but their salary would drop to \$85 000 because that was competitively all that I could afford to pay; that was the Perth rate. They said that was no problem. They did that. In many instances, they came to me within two to three months asking to please go back to FIFO. They were not happy because of the \$100 000 pay cut. As much as they were probably glad to be back home, they almost felt compelled to go back to FIFO work because of their financial circumstances. Maybe that is something that the committee can look at.

Very briefly, the only other thing that I came across was the importance of the families, including members of families who are left back in Perth, to have a very clear and definitive communication strategy. To a degree, we hear that men typically like to fix things. Ladies sometimes just want to talk about something and do not necessarily expect a resolution, as gathered from the book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. I do not claim to be an expert but we tend to be more doers; we want to get right in there and fix something. When people are up onsite, removed from home, and they talk to their loved ones, who say that little Johnny is having a bit of trouble at school and he got teased and whatnot, that raises anxiety levels because they want to fix it. They want to be there but they cannot because they are away. At the end of the day, our staff could do whatever they wanted. If little Johnny breaks his arm, by all means, tell your other half; that is pretty serious. With some of the more minor things—it is up to each family to determine—they need to be mindful that if they were passing on all these minor things, especially when there is not much the other partner can do about it at the time, they are potentially adding an element of stress. We found it handy to encourage our workforce to work out a clear communication strategy.

I could share more but I am mindful that a few other speakers wish to get up and we are running out of time for this debate. I support the motion. I wish the committee all the best. If nothing else happens other than one single

life is saved by the recommendations that the committee comes up with, I am sure it will have been a worthwhile use of its time.

**MS A.R. MITCHELL (Kingsley — Parliamentary Secretary)** [4.52 pm]: I rise to support the amendment to the motion. I would like to provide a bit more information rather than talk about my experiences in this matter. None of us like to read the headlines in the paper about the nine fly in, fly out workers who have lost their lives in just over a year due to suspected suicide. We all have people in our electorates, probably even family members, who are part of the FIFO workforce. I am referring to fly in, fly out and drive in, drive out workers, all of whom are absent from home for certain periods. As the member for Albany said, with his lifestyle and that of other country members, he is in a similar situation as well.

It is also important that we look at some of the issues that need to be addressed. The committee will probably have a bit more to look at than what it may have considered. I have been advised by the coroner's office that the reported number of deaths by suicide cannot be substantiated for a number of reasons. Those members who understand how the coroner's office works know that it is not just a matter of something being in the paper; things have to be determined through a number of categories, and it takes time. FIFO is not a category that the coroner's office works with. It works with different things. The fly in, fly out industry does not come under one of its categories. It is difficult to get substantiated evidence on some of those matters.

In June 2013, the deaths of four FIFO workers were reported. The State Coroner is currently looking at these individual cases. One of the issues that the member for Eyre raised is that some of the investigations might be quite difficult and very sensitive because some families may not want to be part of them. They are going through the grieving process now and they are trying to deal with their loss.

There is still no specific evidence—quite a few reports have been done, which we have all heard about and they are all important—to suggest that FIFO workers have a higher rate of suicide. We do know that the demographics of the FIFO workers align with the groups that have the highest rates of suicides. Therefore, we have a concentration of the age group and the stresses that people may have to deal with within that industry or that work environment that puts them at a higher risk. I believe the committee will have a good look at those factors because those things make a difference.

I do not intend to go over all the reports that different members have mentioned. It is important to recognise that this issue is of concern around the country. It is certainly a concern in Western Australia because we have a great number of fly in, fly out workers. I think I read somewhere that there could be 60 000-odd FIFO workers in our state. They are an important component of our economic advantage. We need to do as much as we can to protect this part of the industry. I believe that the committee should certainly consider the work that has been done by other organisations and the Senate.

Along with a couple of members, I have referred to the demographics of people in the FIFO industry. Most deaths by suicide are young people of working age. Suicide is the leading cause of death for males aged 25 to 44 years and for females aged 25 to 34 years. The proportion of suicides that are work related is unclear.

It is important that people are now talking about suicides. It was not that long ago that suicide was not mentioned. It was not that long ago that we did not talk about someone suiciding because it was considered to be a trigger for other suicides to occur. I believe it is important that we are talking about suicides. I believe that will help a number of people who may find themselves in a stressful situation to make a step towards getting some treatment.

The other thing that I mentioned before is that the cause of death data in Australia, including suicide, is not reported or published by profession or employment so the categories that currently exist—that may be something that the coroner and other groups need to change—does not give us an accurate picture in many situations.

Going back to that demographic of fly in, fly out workers, the average age is about 38 years and 80 per cent of the FIFO workforce is male. Once again, putting those extra things together with that data means that perhaps these people are a very concentrated demographic in an environment that puts them at more stress. There are 63 500 workers employed in FIFO in Western Australia. We all know that that work pattern is likely to continue. The arrangement patterns may change, and that may be something that the committee brings out. We certainly need to ensure that we support the industry as much as we can to enable this industry to be successful as well as look after the people who work in it.

I would like to talk a little about the construction phase. The people employed in the construction phase seem to have a higher rate of suicide. When we separate that from the fly in, fly out workforce, they are part of it, though they may not be specifically with a company. Construction workers are apparently at least three times more likely to die by suicide than Australian males in the general population. Often it comes down to the characteristics of a male and the characteristics of a female. Many of these people understand that support is

probably available on site. They have access to employee assistance programs. Many times it is reported that the people concerned probably did not contact any of those services. It might be that the committee looks at some of the gaps to see how this can be improved and make sure that the mental health stigma we talked about is addressed so that there is a reduction in the number of people who do not access assistance programs and support services before they get to a point of critical need.

I will not go through the other reports. I will mention a couple of things that the government is doing, because it is important to understand the extent of what is going on in the government area. The state government is committed to continuing the state suicide prevention strategy. There is a new \$3 million investment for that strategy for 2014–15 that goes to community grants, evidence-based mental health and suicide prevention training and strategic departments. Another study, which I said I would not refer to, is from the Mental Illness Fellowship of Western Australia, which distributes the resource “This FIFO Life” that has resources and short videos for workers and their families. That the families are an important part of this has come up quite a few times in this debate. It is not just about the employee who is doing the flying in and flying out, the families need to be a part of the picture. I think this is very important.

There a couple of places in the south west—I think Bunbury has one—where there are support systems in place. Many of the larger companies have the ability to put these support systems in place as well. In his speech on this matter last week, the Minister for Mines and Petroleum referred to the work that Rio Tinto is doing, so I will not go over that. Rio Tinto has a memorandum of understanding with the Mental Health Commission to do further work on initiatives and to investigate some of the concerns around that.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr I.M. Britza):** Excuse me, member. Members, the conversations are getting a bit loud. Keep it down a little, please.

**Ms A.R. MITCHELL:** Mr Andrew Harding from Rio Tinto has been appointed to the Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention specifically for his expertise in this area and his ability to work closely within that industry. I will refer to men in construction and the very good organisation Mates in Construction that comes under the suicide prevention strategy as well. It received \$282 000 to implement a suicide prevention program to raise awareness across the industry and host community connectors and caseworkers to support and follow up individuals at risk. Mates in Construction has proved to be a very valuable program. It uses an engagement model in which it trains a certain number of people—I suppose we refer to it as the old train-the-trainer situation. Mates in Construction has taken this on board very seriously and is getting some excellent results, although, as we all know, there is still more to come and more to be done. Mining companies have been encouraged to develop their own plans. I think many of them are aware of that; so much so, that companies that used to just deal with occupational and physical health, now have mental health as very much a part of their programming. They probably need to go back even further, not waiting until people come up on site, but looking at what might need to be done before people take on a job in that industry. The Chamber of Minerals and Energy has realised that it has a role to play in this. It is working through a number of avenues. Last time I was at a mine, I saw encouragement of the use of wi-fi, Skype and FaceTime so people could have closer contact with their families. I believe that AngloGold Ashanti ensures that families are involved in staff inductions and encourages families to visit its sites on weekends and school holidays by providing flights. Many companies are taking this matter very, very seriously.

I think the challenge, and we have many, is to look at what we can do for the future. I am not going to say to not dwell on the past. I think a lot of work has been done already. I am sure that the committee will look at a number of things that will provide the industry with more opportunity of what could be done in the future. Obviously, in the community there are some very active organisations such as beyondblue and Lifeline Australia. It is just amazing what those organisations do. It is almost a little frightening to know how much they have to do. But they do a wonderful job and we are very, very fortunate to have them. In closing, the government supports the member for Eyre’s amendment. We recognise that there is more to be done and that there is a place for further work to be undertaken in this area. We would like to think that all the work we can do will be done collaboratively and supportively so that we are not reinventing wheels all the time, but can make a difference to the people we need in our workforce who operate under these conditions.

**MR M. McGOWAN (Rockingham — Leader of the Opposition) [5.05 pm]:** In closing the debate on the amendment to this motion, I thank members for their contributions on this issue. I thank the members of the Education and Health Standing Committee, particularly the chairperson for his amendments, which I think are roughly similar to what was originally proposed. The first line of the amendment states, “respectfully requests”. We are respectfully requesting that the committee acts within its authority to undertake such an inquiry. I am pleased that there are some time frames around the inquiry, because otherwise it might drag on. I thank the committee for its support of this initiative.

I will not talk for long, but I want to say a few things. Firstly, an inquiry into deaths by suicide in the mining industry is not an attack on the mining industry. It is not an attack on the mining industry by me or the Parliament. I am a strong supporter of the mining industry and the employment and economic strength that it provides to our state. But at times there are issues, and I think it is important that we examine these issues in a considered manner. I could have flown off the handle and come out with my own solutions for rosters and the like. However, I think it is better that this issue is examined properly and expert evidence taken, rather than whatever my or other members' prejudices might be in a proposed solution. I want to make it absolutely and fundamentally plain to the mining industry that this motion is about supporting the mining industry to find a solution to an important issue. That is what it is about. I would like to make that plain to the mining industry to ensure that there is no confusion.

Secondly, it is about reducing the prevalence of suicide. My original motion was about finding the causes and reducing the prevalence of suicide. This amendment is to inquire into the overarching issue of suicide. I think the fundamental nub of this issue is what we do to reduce the prevalence of suicide. I suspect that the committee will go to earlier intervention strategies and perhaps making sure that people who are contemplating suicide know that there is somewhere they can go where there will not be consequences such as losing their job. I think that is probably where the committee will go, but I will not pre-empt that. I hope that the committee thoroughly examines all the issues to come up with some solutions to reduce the prevalence of suicide.

Thirdly, a speaker asked whether there is a causal connection between fly in, fly out work and suicide. I do not believe that is true. I do not believe there is a causal connection between FIFO work and suicide. I do think that there are individuals who are prone to mental illness and, perhaps, self-harm for whom the isolation, distance and loneliness of fly in, fly out work might exacerbate existing conditions. I do not think fly in, fly out work is the cause of the condition, but I think that there might be individuals for whom it exacerbates the condition and results in that shocking outcome, which is suicide. There is no doubt in my mind that males are most vulnerable. Most FIFO workers are male and, as we know, males are five times more likely to suicide than women. That is the common experience across the community. I think that, in that sense, males' vulnerability will probably be the main focus of the inquiry.

I do not agree with one member; I think it was the member for Joondalup who said that males are more likely to be doers. I cannot say I support that assertion.

**Mr I.C. Blayney** interjected.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, of course. He said that males are more likely to be doers than women are. He might want to reconsider that one. That is not my life experience and that certainly is not my life experience in my house. I am more likely to be lying in bed in the morning whilst my wife is getting the kids' lunches ready and everything is done by the time I stagger out. All I can say is that I would not like to speculate on who is more likely to be the doers in our society, but in my experience I cannot say that I am the principal doer in —

**Mr M.H. Taylor:** I think the term he used was "fixer".

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** I think he said "doer". In any event, I am not sure what point the member of Joondalup was trying to make and I am not sure that he would be able to explain it now, but males are more vulnerable and, therefore, most of the inquiry will examine the issues surrounding male FIFO workers. However, if there are instances of FIFO women suiciding, that could also be examined.

The next point I want to make is the importance of FIFO workers in our community. They are incredibly important for our society and the strength of our economy. They are roughly half the direct workers in the mining industry. I remember one former member of this place referred to fly in, fly out workers as the cancer of the bush. I do not agree with that. I think it is a fact of life in the mining industry and we should support what makes our mining industry efficient and those families and those individuals who undertake this style of work. It is not easy for someone to go away from their family and household for weeks on end and be on an aircraft every week. If we ask one of our colleagues in the federal Parliament, they will tell us that it is not easy. If we ask one of our state colleagues who fly in and fly out, such as the member for Kimberley, they will tell us that it is not easy to be on an aircraft all the time. It is also not easy to be a drive in, drive out worker who covers long distances. If we ask the member for Collie–Preston, he will tell us it is a hard lot. We need to support these people. If anyone was to infer that this is somehow an attack on fly in, fly out per se or an attack on fly in, fly out workers, I would say that is not the case. That is not what we are trying to do here. It is a hard job and we want to support people.

There are already organisations out there to help. FIFO Families is one. These organisations have websites and Facebook sites and they engage families. Long may it reign and we should support those sorts of organisations.

**Extract from Hansard**

[ASSEMBLY — Wednesday, 20 August 2014]

p5643b-5653a

Acting Speaker; Dr Graham Jacobs; Mr David Templeman; Mr Peter Abetz; Mr Jan Norberger; Ms Andrea Mitchell; Mr Mark McGowan

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I hope that they embrace what is happening here and that they provide evidence to this committee when it holds its hearings into this issue.

It is a hard job. People have talked anecdotally about different experiences. I will tell members about the first time I went underground. I went underground in 1997 on a mining tour hosted by a gentleman by the name of Peter Ellery, who is Hon Sue Ellery's father and he was the CEO of the Chamber of Minerals and Energy. He took five other newly elected members and me on a tour of mines around Western Australia. I went down to the bottom of, I think, the Bronzewing Gold Mine. We drove down and down in a four-wheel drive to the bottom of the mine where men were drilling holes to place the dynamite to blast and extract the rock to grind it and eventually extract gold. At the bottom of the mine we met one of the men operating the drilling rig. I did not know him very well at that time because we had been elected only a few months earlier, but the member for Willagee, as he then was, Alan Carpenter, and I had a conversation with this fellow. They turned off the equipment and we had a conversation. We asked him about life and he said, "You know I fly in, fly out." He told us what he was paid and it was about 70 per cent above what we were paid as members of Parliament. It was about 1.7 times what a member of Parliament was paid. He had a hard job. He was down the bottom of this mine; it was dark and he worked 12-hour shifts with equipment that was difficult to use. He was a fly in, fly out worker and he said he had to do it. When we asked why, he told us that he had just split up with his third wife and he had children to each ex-wife. He said that his maintenance bill was so high that that was the only way he could afford to provide for them and to have anything left over for himself. That was his story.

People do it for different reasons. Most of them do FIFO work because it supplies a good income for them and their families. When FIFO workers are home, they are home, so many of them like the lifestyle. As we understand, when we are home, we are not necessarily home, because we have other things going on. That FIFO lifestyle suits some people.

In conclusion, I thank everyone for their participation. I know the union movement in Western Australia has been calling for such an inquiry in Western Australia for some time and I thank it for its calls. I hope that this allows the unions to provide some evidence to the inquiry about their concerns and experiences. I look forward to a report that, at the end of the day, provides some initiatives and ideas that might save the lives of our fellow Western Australians.

Amendment put and passed.

*Motion, as Amended*

Question put and passed.