

ANTI-VACCINATION BILLBOARD

Grievance

MR J.N. CAREY (Perth — Parliamentary Secretary) [9.24 am]: My grievance today is about the recent media coverage in relation to a billboard that was in my electorate. It happened last week. I was driving by and I noticed a billboard. It said, “Do you know what’s in a vaccine?” It provided a link to a US anti-vaccination group called Learn The Risk. I have to say from the outset that I was astounded that there had been investment in a billboard like this for this simple reason: that this billboard promotes a lie. It does not promote choice; it promotes harm to children—that is a fact. It is based on a campaign of fear. We know this simple truth, based on science, that vaccinations save lives—no ifs, no buts. I am passionate about this topic because we know that around two to three million children are estimated to be saved by vaccinations. The alternative is terrible for our community because it can see that diseases that have been cured are being spread in communities. We must do everything we can. The billboard is akin to smoking cigarettes. We banned billboards that advertised cigarettes. Why? Because there was a clear connect to causing harm to our community. I argue we should also absolutely ban these types of billboards that create ill harm to children.

It was disappointing to see that we were criticised by the member for Dawesville. The member for Dawesville got onto Twitter to criticise the Minister for Health and I for actually campaigning against this billboard. This is the guy who does so many stunts. He is the Jedi master of stunts! We only have to learn from him. I say this to the member for Dawesville: on this side we have values and convictions. We will, regardless, hold these types of lies to account, unlike the member who sways and switches across. He has been doing so many fake protests. I can imagine him at 14 years old, when *The Princess Diaries* came out, saying to his mother, “Quick, let’s go and protest—they’re destroying the monarchy!” That is his kind of values. He is the master of stunts. We see it regularly over crime figures. We see it over the hospital. He is the master of stunts. On this side we will stand firm to our values and convictions. That is right.

I have to say this: the rest of the community is standing with us against this billboard. I note that the Australian Medical Association has actually said that this was an appalling and blatant anti-health message and that these misleading campaigns undermine confidence in evidence-based vaccination programs and could be linked to a resurgence of preventable infectious diseases. It is completely unacceptable that billboards promoting lies and conspiracy theories are on busy streets. We stood with the doctors, unlike the member for Dawesville, to oppose this billboard.

Several members interjected.

Mr J.N. CAREY: We stood with the doctors. Catherine Hughes has been a vocal advocate for the importance of vaccination since her son, Riley, died aged only 32 days due to whooping cough. She said —

“To be honest I’m pretty surprised that somebody was willing to accept money from the anti-vaccine lobby to display this billboard,” ...

“I was really disappointed as a parent who lost a child to a vaccine-preventable disease because they were too young to be vaccinated.

“I’d really hate for another parent to go through a similar experience simply because they’d been scared into not vaccinating...and that’s what this sign is trying to do.

“We know these anti-vaccine groups in the US are quite well organised and established. It seems to be like their mission is to come outside of the US and spread their fears of vaccination in other countries.

I welcome her words. She speaks from personal experience. I have no idea how it would be to experience such a loss like that. I want to thank her for her advocacy.

There is good news. The health minister and the City of Vincent acted swiftly to look at whether there was planning approval, and also complaints to the relevant Australian advertising board. I am pleased to say that the billboard came down this week, as I understand it, because of the public pressure; because people were prepared to speak out loud and advocate and say that this kind of false advertising does harm to our community. It has been interesting; I have received a few texts and emails from anti-vaxxers, who have criticised me and the Minister for Health. I want to say to those people: I will trust the science. I will listen to the science and the incredible gains we have made through vaccinations across the world.

I know this personally. We see these people who Google for a few hours and are then completely convinced that vaccinations will cause harm. I base this on my own personal experience of strangers coming to me to tell me that cancers are curable through natural therapies. I remember distinctly a stranger coming to tell me that my mother, who had terminal brain cancer, could be cured by natural therapies. Rubbish. I say this: we have to trust the science,

Mr John Carey; Acting Speaker; Mr David Templeman; Ms Rita Saffioti; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Mr Roger Cook

we have to trust doctors and we have to trust the incredible amount of research that is being undertaken every day to ensure that we have a healthy future for our children.

That is why I have brought this grievance to the Minister for Health—so that we look at every avenue possible to tackle this, just as we banned cigarette advertising, which we acknowledged and understood caused harm to our community. We need to take a similar approach to such dangerous and ill-conceived advertising.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr I.C. Blayney): Members, I have received the document from the Minister for Police. I am satisfied that the document is the minister's own notes. I will also say that the Speaker came to tell me that he has established a precedent, if you like, for situations in which a minister is reading notes from a phone or iPad, whereby the Speaker is entitled to ask the minister to table the document that is in the appliance, so I can ask ministers to table their phone if I want to.

Point of Order

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Just to seek clarification, is that determination for all members of this place?

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr I.C. Blayney): It is only in cases such as the one the member for Dawesville referred to. If the minister is reading from an official document—I assume that only a minister would be reading from an official document—the Speaker is entitled to ask them to table it.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: If a member in this place is standing and quoting from their phone and they are challenged to table it, is the ruling applicable to all members in this place?

The ACTING SPEAKER: It relates only to ministers.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Further to the point of order, can I ask: is this different from the ruling under the previous government? Ministers under the previous government often quoted from phones and were never asked to produce them. In fact, I remember that it was specifically ruled that phones were not admissible. Can I ask: is this a new precedent that has been set by the current Speaker for this government?

The ACTING SPEAKER: I am afraid my memory is not good enough to recall that. I can remember an argument about a telephone once on this issue, but this is very much, if you like, where the Parliament has arrived at on this issue now.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: Further to the point of order, I would just like to point out that I was not quoting from a document. I was referring to crime statistics and looking down at the numbers. I had not memorised all the crime decreases so I was using my notes as an aide-mémoire to quote the significant decreases in crime in Mandurah. It was not a quote from an official document.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Thank you, minister.

Grievance Resumed

MR R.H. COOK (Kwinana — Minister for Health) [9.34 am]: I thank the honourable member for raising this important issue. It is an issue that strikes at the heart of his community and I think it is very appropriate that he has brought it to this place today.

I, too, was disturbed by the content of this billboard. It was very deceitful, very damaging and, quite frankly, very much contrary to the public interest. Members will recall that the billboard asked people whether they knew what was in their vaccines. On face value, it gave the impression that it was asking people to be proactive consumers of health services, which in itself is not an unworthy contribution. But a closer look at this billboard and the website it invited people to look at reveals it to represent the very worst of paranoid conspiracy theories from the anti-vax movement. After fighting through the GoFundMe pages at the front, people navigating the website will find the very worst type of fearmongering about vaccination programs, designed to scare the bejesus out of patients and parents of patients. In the public health space we continue to deal with these ill-informed, damaging claims by the anti-vaccination movement. It is there to deceive and to do damage. For that reason alone, we must take action in the very strongest terms possible to make sure that it does not get its damaging message out into the community.

Vaccines save lives; we have to be very clear on this. They have saved countless millions of lives across the world. It is true that vaccines, like any medical procedure, involve risks, but the purported risks claimed by this particular movement is the most dangerous element of this issue. The member reminded us about Catherine Hughes and her crusade in the name of her departed son, Riley, to spread the message of the important contribution vaccinations make to our community. The sad loss of her son Riley was the result of a failure in our community to properly promote the importance of the whooping cough vaccine in protecting small infants who are too young to receive it.

I was very impressed by the contribution by the member for Perth, who got out there on the front foot and alerted me and the government to the presence of this billboard. I was also very impressed with the support we were given by the Australian Medical Association and the City of Vincent. The Mayor of the City of Vincent, Emma Cole, also got on the front foot straightaway to explore what avenues the City of Vincent could pursue to pull down this billboard. The city looked at the planning regulations and laws and lodged a complaint with the Advertising Standards Bureau.

Mr John Carey; Acting Speaker; Mr David Templeman; Ms Rita Saffioti; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Mr Roger Cook

The AMA wanted me to exercise the powers I have under section 304 of the Public Health Act 2016, which gives me the capacity to ban the promotion of a product or action that may be deemed a risk to health. Obviously, we are talking about products like cigarettes. The initial interpretation of the act is that it does not go as far as to actually ban the promotion of debate in the health sector, and for that reason we need to look more closely at the law if a future Parliament or government deems that the minister should have those powers.

I point out to members assembled that the McGowan government is committed to making sure that we have very robust and proactive population health policies through the promotion of vaccines. In response to a Central Australian meningococcal W outbreak, we worked rapidly to undertake a mass vaccination program in remote Aboriginal communities—an action that is not widely appreciated within the metropolitan area. We funded the meningococcal ACWY vaccination program for 12-month-olds, with a time-limited catch-up program for children over 12 months through to four years of age. Those aged 15 to 19 years were also able to receive the meningococcal ACWY vaccine through state funding. We continue to work with the commonwealth government in advocating for additional influenza vaccination stocks to protect our citizens, including participating in the national vaccination program through our chemist network for over-65s, in relation to the quadrivalent vaccine. We engaged the Department of Education to reach students in schools and deliver the human papilloma virus vaccine in an efficient manner. Western Australia will be the first international hub for the Human Vaccines Project, a partnership between the Perth Children’s Hospital Foundation and the Telethon Kids Institute, supported by the government to produce more effective vaccines.

The public health debate promotes the benefits of these population programs above those of individual objections to these programs. We do so because it is in the public interest, whether it is tobacco control, vaccinations, or policies that mitigate the impact of alcohol consumption. Public health protects lives. Medicines and vaccinations protect lives. That is why the McGowan government is committed to making sure that we use all the public health mechanisms in our holster to protect the health and interests of Western Australians.