

DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT - ROYAL COMMISSION

**513. Mr P.D. OMODEI to the Premier:**

I refer to the Child Death Review Committee report tabled in May 2006. In 2004-05, the Department for Community Development received 96 coronial notifications of child deaths. Of these, 52 children had had contact with DCD. Of those 52 children who were known to DCD, 43 were aged five years or under and 34 aged one year or under.

- (1) Will the Premier admit that the deaths of these infants were due in part to systemic failures within DCD?
- (2) Why do ministers under the Premier's government take no responsibility for the administration of departments under their control?
- (3) In light of these damning and tragic statistics, will the Premier agree to establish a royal commission to investigate the clear and present failings that exist in the Department for Community Development; and, if not, why not?

**Mr A.J. CARPENTER replied:**

I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question. Before I answer these points directly, Mr Speaker, I would like the indulgence of the house on this matter. I was provided with a letter today from Mrs Margaret Jakins, which she wrote last night after being given by Gary Adshear a version of events that occurred in this Parliament yesterday. She has asked in that letter whether I would read a part of it as a statement to the Parliament. I intend to do that, as it is relevant to this issue. Mrs Jakins writes -

Approximately three weeks prior to Wade's death I approached the department about the possibility of taking the girls interstate to Queensland on holiday. I asked the question because it takes considerable time to get all the consents needed and as a foster carer you cannot just jump on a plane like a normal family. I was given the information get the ball rolling, however I was not given consent then as at that point in time we weren't even sure when we would be going and to obtain full consent you need to provide all the details of dates, times and accommodation arrangements and contact numbers to gain consent. But nevertheless I had approached the department and had asked the question.

I had got no further when the traumatic events of Wade's death occurred. A holiday was the last thing on my mind. At a meeting with Jane Brazier after Wade's death a break was discussed with us. Foster carers are sometimes offered respite or a short break away if they have been going through particularly trying times. Children are given respite care to allow carers a break. I use my Ex husband, the children's natural grandfather as our respite carer for weekend breaks. I STRESS at no time ever have I ever been offered to be bought off, bribed, had an all expensed paid holiday's to Queensland ever, and certainly not after Wade died. What kind of a human being would I be to accept that and given that was NEVER, NEVER offered that I find the whole line of this question highly offensive and disgusting to say the least.

DCD have been guilty of many things when it came to this period of time but never, never did they stoop that low and I feel offended for Jane Brazier. That meeting was about the events leading up to Wade's death and a chance to tell how I felt.

We did eventually have a holiday to Queensland the following year at the end of April beginning of May, some nine and a half months after Wade's death. I didn't get the final consent for that holiday until approximately three to four weeks before we actually left due to my daughter not having signed the consent.

I paid the airfares, accommodation, hire car etc up front and the only reimbursement we got was for the children's airfares and their theme park passes paid for. My partner Mark and myself funded everything else. This is what any foster carer is entitled to and I know other carers who have also had airfares paid for the children in their care. I take great exception that we were somehow bought off, paid blood money for the death of my grand child. We simply needed a holiday away from all the stress surrounding that terrible death of a little boy. The department paying the children's airfares enabled us to have a modest, but very pleasant break away.

We are going to Queensland again in September and again the DCD as the children's legal guardians are paying their airfares. As they do their medical cost, dental costs etc as their legal guardians. This will be the first holiday since that last holiday in Queensland as we are self employed and getting away is difficult when you run your own business. I work very hard as does my partner. We run our own home renovation business and I work hands on in a very physical job. I also do relief work at a child

care centre as that is my interest and training. I do not need anyone paying my airfare, I live in a large home, very comfortably with money in the bank and I only accept help from the department when it benefits the children I care for.

I suspect it was not voiced in parliament that the girls grandfather pays their private school fees and I find it hard to accept even . . . the foster carers allowance for these children given they are my grandchildren. SO NO, I DID NOT GET FULL CONSENT FOR THE HOLIDAY BEFORE WADE DIED. WE DID NOT GO ON HOLIDAY UNTIL NINE MONTHS AFTER WADE DIED. MY PARTNER AND I WERE NOT FUNDED BY THE DEPARTMENT NOR EVER HAVE BEEN TO GO ON HOLIDAY. WE WERE NOT BOUGHT OFF BY DCD. I FEEL THAT MY INTEGRITY AS A WOMAN WHO IS PROUD AND WORKS HARD FOR EVERYTHING I HAVE HAS BEEN INSULTED.

Mr Carpenter, I think that before you answer questions like this in future it would be wise for you check out the facts as it seems Ms McHale even had it wrong when she said we had consent before Wade Died and I certainly wasn't funded for myself and the girls, only the airfares for the girls. It wasn't at my express request before Wade's death but an inquiry that did not eventuate until much later that year after I lodged all the dates, times and destination. Just as I have done this time.

Whoever the person was that asked that despicable question should ask themselves what they might be going through if they had been through this very tragic, trying, stressful period. My family just want to get on with picking up the pieces of our lives and focus on a better future for all concerned.

I also would draw your attention to the fact that your government and any future governments need to focus on this growth area of child protection and how to make the system better, safer and not full of the bureaucratic nonsense that seems to encompass this government department. It deserves a priority one, to stop these senseless deaths that I believe are avoidable, if everyone just focuses on what is the important issue here. Children being afforded the protection that they deserve, governments acknowledging that this is a priority one issue, and then acting on that with the right resourcing and attention it deserves.

I don't particularly care who is in government at the moment, and I do accept the coroners findings when he says that the Minister, my local MLA Mark McGowan and the family was misled. I think that that was pretty obvious. I do caution you all though that sometimes you should question these things. That is what you are paid for by the people of Western Australia.

No doubt tomorrow I will have to field many more phone calls, to the detriment of myself and my family it needs to stop.

If there is a royal commission or an inquiry, then of course if I were called upon to give evidence, I would willingly do so to assist that this never happens to another family. Now, please let my family be that, a family. We have had enough.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Jakins

Mr Speaker, I thank you and the rest of the house for allowing me to read that rather long extract from the letter, but I believe it was very important. I said in this Parliament yesterday that a very unfortunate line in this matter was being pursued. What happened in this Parliament yesterday was absolutely disgraceful.

**Mr C.J. Barnett:** No, it wasn't.

**Mr A.J. CARPENTER:** It was disgraceful, disgusting and repugnant.

**Mr P.D. Omodei:** You have been caught out. You should have made sure that you were properly briefed.

**Mr A.J. CARPENTER:** Mr Speaker, the answers to the direct questions are -

(1)-(3) Yes, we established the Child Death Review Committee. The number of deaths is extremely disquieting and extremely disturbing. It is distressing. That is why we have put into place many changes so that the government can react to the circumstances in which these young children find themselves; unlike the complete neglect of this area that existed under the previous regime.

I do not believe that we would profit from a royal commission into this issue. We need to make sure that the changes that have been recommended and the additional resourcing we have put in place are effective. That is the commitment I gave to Mrs Jakins. We need to make sure in government that we do everything we possibly can - and the minister responsible does everything he possibly can - to minimise the likelihood of any such recurrence. What happened in this Parliament yesterday and the

commentary in the media yesterday afternoon made it a black day for this Parliament, for which some of the people who took part should be ashamed. I hope that we never see the like of it again.