

WORLD AIDS DAY

Statement

HON PETER FOSTER (Mining and Pastoral) [6.22 pm]: Today is World AIDS Day. It marks the fortieth anniversary of the HIV–AIDS pandemic. It raises awareness across the world and in the community about the issues surrounding HIV and AIDS. It is a day for people to show their support for people living with HIV, and to commemorate the people who have died. UNAIDS, the United Nations program for ending HIV, estimates that since the start of the pandemic, 36.3 million people around the world have died of AIDS-related illnesses, and 79.3 million have been infected. As of 2020, 37.7 million people were living with HIV.

Those statistics are saddening and frightening at the same time. I do not know what it must have been like to live at the peak of the AIDS pandemic. The cohort of gay men who bore the brunt of it were, in large part, part of the generation before mine. I was only a year old when the first case was announced. I do not pretend to know exactly what it would have been like, but there are many accounts that can be read or watched, such as the TV show, *It's a Sin*, written by Russell T Davies and set in London, about young gay men living through the pandemic. It shows how fear and prejudice left many of the stories from that time untold—kept between those who experienced the pandemic firsthand. It was a community that must have felt like it was under siege: the fear, the stigma, the judgement, and funeral after funeral after funeral, week after week after week.

What must it have felt like as some, while laying dying on their beds, were calmly told by others that what was happening to them was some divine judgement. On today of all days, I think it should be said very clearly that there was never any justification for saying something so cruel. Nothing makes that right. There is certainly no way that such statements deserve to be protected under commonwealth legislation. Thankfully, things are now different and progress in the fight against HIV is clear. That progress shows the difference that good, evidence-based public health policy can make and the importance of combating ignorance and stigma with education, putting facts over fiction. Around the world, 28.2 million people are living with HIV and accessing antiretroviral therapy, which is drastically improving their life expectancy and quality of life. Treatment as prevention has drastically reduced transmission. Globally, HIV infections have halved since 1997. In Australia, infections went down by 37 per cent from 2016 to 2020.

The ongoing investment in community-led HIV organisations such as the WAAC has paid huge dividends. Founded in 1985, WAAC, formerly known as the Western Australian AIDS Council, delivers essential community services, such as the M Clinic, which supports the sexual health of men. M Clinic provides an easily accessible, supportive, confidential and non-judgmental environment for the prevention, testing and treatment of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Being able to access that service without stigma or judgement means that more infections are prevented, detected and treated early.

The Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations reports that as of 2021, Australia has virtually eliminated HIV transmission among sex workers and people who inject drugs. Every dollar spent on needle and syringe programs has saved the community \$27 per person in healthcare costs later down the line. This combination of dedicated community-led organisations and commonsense evidence-based policy means that we are on the cusp of something remarkable. The elimination of HIV in Australia is not only possible, it is within reach. We can do it by 2030.

This morning, the Minister for Health, Roger Cook, signed Perth up to the Fast-Track Cities initiative, making Perth the first Australian city to do so. The initiative commits to ending the HIV epidemic in cities and municipalities by 2030 through a 90-90-90 target; that is, 90 per cent of people living with HIV knowing their status, 90 per cent of people who know their HIV-positive status on antiretroviral therapy and 90 per cent of people on antiretroviral therapy. I congratulate the minister for recognising and committing to the Fast-Track Cities initiative. Congratulations also to the WAAC for doing so much to bring us within striking distance of a massive victory for public health. Thank you also to the WAAC for hosting a community breakfast this morning in Yagan Square in honour of World Aids Day. The event was attended by the Governor of Western Australia, Honourable Kim Beazley, AC, Western Australian Senator Louise Pratt and the United States Consul General, David Gainey.

There are still challenges to overcome. People living with HIV still experience discrimination and stigma. There is still ignorance and misunderstanding and barriers to accessing health care and treatment. While treatment for HIV is continually improving, at present there is still no cure. But if we look at how far we have come and at what is now possible, we should know that bringing down those barriers lifts us all up. Today let us honour those lives lost. Today let us stand with those living with HIV. Today is an opportunity for us to come together and advocate for positive healthy people in inclusive, connected communities. In the spirit of the United Nations 2021 theme, let us end inequalities, let us end AIDS, let us end pandemics.