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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Meniere's Disease

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Jones, Stephen, MP

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Mr STEPHEN JONES (Throsby) (20:34): Although the disease which we discuss today was first discovered by the French physician Prosper Meniere in 1861, I dare say it has been discussed and the name has been used in this chamber more in the last 30 minutes than it has been in the last 30 years. I follow the honourable member in thanking the member for Dunkley for bringing this important issue before the chamber so that we can discuss it and hopefully add to the sum of understanding about a condition which is probably more prevalent on the Australian community than many might think.

Around about 40,000 Australians are thought to suffer from some degree of Meniere's disease. Most people will not have heard of it until they have a family member or friend who is affected. No doubt there are people working in this building who are affected by it, even people who are listening to this debate today or reading it afterwards in the *Hansard*. I know of constituents who suffer from Meniere's disease because I have had contact from them directly. Indeed, I have a staff member who suffers from the disease and I have watched how it has from time to time debilitated her and severely impacted on her enjoyment of life and her capacity to work over the time that I have known her.

It seems that those who have this syndrome are affected in vastly different ways. As has been mentioned already, Meniere's is a syndrome in which excess fluid disturbs the balance of the inner ear and hearing mechanisms and produces a range of symptoms. Some of these symptoms include vertigo, tinnitus, fluctuating hearing loss and a feeling of pressure or fullness, like the ear is full of water. Sometimes it is like the feeling you get after having a swim in a swimming pool. Experiencing these symptoms can be debilitating, demoralising and very distressing.

For those with Meniere's, the random onset of these symptoms is extremely frustrating. One minute you are fine and functioning normally then the next minute you are suffering from vertigo, where you lose all sense of balance and are kept virtually immobile. To move even slightly causes the room around you to spin, causing a disturbing sense of disorientation. Vertigo attacks like this can last for hours and sometimes days and can even be accompanied by vomiting as your body responds to the lack of balance. For those witnessing attacks of vertigo, it can be hard to understand what is actually happening to the person in front of them. The symptoms are hard to understand and explain, even for those who are suffering them. The words, 'I'm sorry—I feel dizzy now and have to lie down,' can interrupt business meetings, running daily errands or social outings.

Because the symptoms are so broad and non-specific, Meniere's is often misdiagnosed. The relatively low profile of Meniere's means that it can be hard to get the correct diagnosis and treatment. It has three stages: stage 1 is the lowest impact and stage 3 the worst. Some sufferers do not progress beyond stage 1, where the symptoms pass more quickly and where people can stay in remission for months and sometimes even years. They are the lucky ones. For people in stage 1, managing the triggers for Meniere's is all important. Dietary changes can lessen the long-term effects of Meniere's disease. For example, because Meniere's is caused by an excess of fluid in the inner ear, for many reducing salt intake can lessen the symptoms of the disease. That is hard, because salt is prevalent in just about everything we eat.

For those in stage 3, Meniere's is almost completely debilitating. In stage 3, Meniere's will force drastic changes to how life is lived every day. Some people are no longer able to go out of the home unaccompanied. They may have to give up driving and their independence. For some people whose Meniere's is triggered by bright lights, they cannot enter a shopping centre or supermarket. I have a constituent in my electorate who has stage 3 Meniere's and managing the disease completely dominates her life. Her frequent incapacity affects relationships with family and friends and caused her to abandon her employment. She has been jeered at as she staggered along the road, trying to get to a safe resting place, by passers-by who mistakenly thought that she was drunk. It is an unfortunate consequence of the public awareness of this health issue being very low. Meniere's is a difficult and challenging syndrome, and once again I thank the member for Dunkley for raising the matter in the House today. (*Time expired*)

Debate adjourned.