



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

World Tuberculosis Day

SPEECH

Monday, 19 March 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Entsch, Warren, MP

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Mr ENTSCHE (Leichhardt—Chief Opposition Whip) (20:19): Mr Deputy Speaker Symon, I apologise if my absence delayed proceedings; I was speaking in the other place and it took me a moment to get across. I would like to associate myself with this debate about tuberculosis. There is no doubt about it; it is a very serious infectious disease, which, despite the availability of effective treatment, remains a major global health problem. Although it is preventable, TB remains a problem through much of the world, mostly in developing countries. In 2010 the World Health Organisation estimated there were over 1.5 million current TB cases and 8.8 million new cases coming forward.

Being parochial as I am, I would like to focus on tuberculosis and the risks that we face here in Australia. The northern boundary of my electorate of Leichhardt is only a couple of kilometres from the mainland of Papua New Guinea, and Western Province in Papua New Guinea is seriously afflicted by this disease. Tuberculosis now consumes 13 per cent of all hospital bed days, second only to obstetric cases, and is the cause of 11 per cent of all deaths in Western Province. Currently, more people in Papua New Guinea contract tuberculosis than become infected with HIV. If the condition remains untreated, a person with infectious tuberculosis of the lungs potentially infects an extra 10 to 15 people every year.

Regrettably there is a disproportionately large incidence of tuberculosis in children in Papua New Guinea; almost 30 per cent of reported tuberculosis cases are within the age group of birth to 14 years. Such high levels of tuberculosis diagnosed in children indicates active transmission of tuberculosis within communities. There is also increasing evidence of a new strain of drug resistant tuberculosis. Only the other day, a social worker at Cairns hospital asked me if I could assist in the repatriation of a young lass, Violet Ausi, who has been at the Cairns Base Hospital now for a number of years while she was treated for drug resistant tuberculosis. Unfortunately her mother had already passed away; she was being cared for by an aunt. She is 12 years of age and been away from her village for almost three years. She has only just managed to get clearance.

A little while before that, it was a gentleman from the Western Province, Aniba Petru. I had to organise a function for him. He had lost three of his children and his wife to the disease. In an effort to save his 13-year-old daughter, he took an 8½ hour dinghy voyage to Saibai Island and was transferred to Cairns. Unfortunately, his daughter died two weeks later of tuberculosis. He ended up in there for four months, being treated for the disease. He had no resources to be able to take his daughter home. She had been kept in a mortuary for 4½ months. Through the very generous support of individuals within my community, I was able to raise money for him to take his daughter home and give her a decent burial.

This is the real human face of the disease, and it is becoming more and more prolific in our area. I think it is critically important. Recently there was a government decision to not continue to fund the tuberculosis clinics in the Torres Strait. I am working very closely with the minister for health at the moment in the hope that we can reinstate and reverse that decision.

Recognition needs to go to people like Dr Graham Simpson, Dr Leslie Everard, Professor Ian Wronski and Julian Waring. These are people at the front line. These are the people out there, trying to sort this problem out, trying to provide the services that are needed. We certainly need a lot more in the way of funding if we are going to take on this challenge. If we do not deal with the problem on our front doorstep, unfortunately, because of the contagious nature of the disease, it will certainly spread further into our community.

Debate adjourned.