



Speech by

Hon. ANNA BLIGH

MEMBER FOR SOUTH BRISBANE

Hansard 15 September 1998

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Cootharinga Society of North Queensland

Hon. A. M. BLIGH (South Brisbane—ALP) (Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care and Minister for Disability Services) (10 a.m.), by leave: As honourable members will be aware, two reports relating to the Cootharinga Society of North Queensland have been tabled by myself and the Minister for Police and Corrective Services, the Honourable Tom Barton, this morning. The first is a report of the Queensland Police Service investigation called Operation Funnel into disturbing allegations raised about the care of people in this facility. The second report is that of an independent consultant, Mr Ron Joachim, engaged by the then Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care, Mr Kevin Lingard, to provide an up-to-date analysis of the current operations of the Cootharinga Society.

Both of these reports clearly identify that there were significant problems with the Cootharinga Society of North Queensland. They also both acknowledge that the present management has done much to improve the quality of services provided to its clients. This Government is well aware of how important the release of the Health Rights Commission report and police report is to all interested parties. The Cootharinga Society, its staff, current and former residents, families and the community generally have been seeking the release of these reports for a long time. I have met with many of the families and people involved with Cootharinga as Opposition spokesperson and as Minister. This Government promised that we would do whatever it took to release the Health Rights Commission report, and I wish to sincerely thank those people for their patience.

When I was last in Townsville, I met with many family members and other concerned people to explain why the release of these documents was taking so long. There are many reasons, not least of which include the cruel political bumbling, delays and thoughtlessness of the former Government in the handling of this matter. Worse than the delays and political ineptitude in dealing with the issue is the former Government's failure to be honest with the people whose lives had been deeply affected by these issues. Rather than be honest, they chose to drag it out and leave people waiting with no explanation as to why the report could not be released.

I am happy to tell the House today what the former Government failed to tell those people. The Health Rights Commission report was never written for public consumption. As a result there is a complex web of privacy, defamation, sub judice and the possible effect of this material on further prosecutions that must be properly addressed before this report of the Health Rights Commission or any aspect of it can be made public. This is a regrettable position. I wish it were otherwise. Once again, I find myself asking the families and friends whose lives have been affected by the events contained in these reports to be patient.

Those families have generously acknowledged that it is in everyone's best interests to follow correct procedure on this matter, for the sake of their own privacy and that of others. I have had extensive consultations with all agencies of Government involved before releasing the documents here this morning. Advice from Police Commissioner, Jim O'Sullivan, is very clear that the Health Rights Commission report cannot yet be tabled because a number of matters in need of further investigation remain outstanding. I make a firm commitment to all those concerned that the Government will facilitate individual and group briefings on the information contained in those reports relating to them once the matters under active police investigation have ceased.

The complaints investigated by the Health Rights Commission, which mainly related to the operations of the nursing home, were horrifying, even more so because they relate to acts against people who are extremely vulnerable, by the very people whom they should have been able to trust—their carers. The police have thoroughly investigated all the allegations through a task force which operated over a period of six months. As a result of the investigations, charges were laid against two people. Apart from the unresolved matters, the police have recommended that no further criminal prosecutions be commenced in relation to any of the investigations. The police report makes 22 recommendations, 10 of which relate to the Queensland Police Service. Ten recommendations are referred to my own department for action.

The Joachim report on the other hand is an evaluation of the services currently being provided by the society and reports that, with very few exceptions, the quality of services today is of a high standard. The report includes 28 recommendations relating to the improvement of the policies and practices of both my department and the Cootharinga Society of North Queensland. I am committed to implementing the recommendations arising from these reports. Many recommendations from the Joachim report have either been fully implemented or are well on their way to completion.

In relation to the police report recommendations, the following actions are being taken. The Department of Families, Youth and Community Care is working with the disability services sector to identify and implement procedures which will promote improvement to service delivery and adherence to high standards.

I am working closely with the Attorney-General to ensure that changes are made to the Coroners Act 1958 to require mandatory reporting of all deaths of people with disabilities in institutional care. My department is implementing a recommendation to make the current disability support worker training course a base qualification for workers in this field.

We have gone further than to simply implement the recommendations in the reports. I have approved \$150,000 in funding to relocate the remaining five children with disabilities living in the accommodation service which operates from the old nursing home site. In consultation with families, the five children will be relocated to alternative, more appropriate accommodation. Moving these five children is an important step in closing the book on a troubled past and looking to a brighter future of care. I have also approved funding of \$20,000 to provide counselling for the former residents of the Warburton Street nursing home site and their families, who have suffered stress as a result of past practices at that facility. These are the steps my department has taken to ensure that this situation cannot happen again. As Minister for Disability Services, I will not tolerate any form of abuse or mistreatment of people with disabilities in the care of this State. It is my responsibility and that of my department to ensure that people with disabilities are cared for in a supportive and respectful environment. Anything less simply is not good enough.
