



Speech by

Hon. MERRI ROSE

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

Hansard 10 March 1999

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

QAS Heroin Information Brochure

Hon. M. ROSE (Currumbin—ALP) (Minister for Emergency Services) (10.05 a.m.), by leave: The number of children and teenagers taking hard drugs is increasing, while the ages of the victims are decreasing. Of the 400 overdose patients treated by ambulance officers in the past 12 months, 74 were aged from 12 to 19 years. Disturbing statistics show that children as young as 12 and 13 are experimenting with alcohol and marijuana and then progressing to harder drugs such as speed and heroin by the age of 15 or 16. The trend continues to increase as heroin becomes cheaper and more potent.

Ambulance officers, particularly those working in the south-east corner of the State, are called to between 30 and 50 overdoses a month. One particularly disturbing case involved a Brisbane girl who overdosed on heroin at her 14th birthday party. Fortunately, she survived. But ambulance officers are continually saddened and frustrated by the seemingly pointless cycle of self-destruction they see week after week from people addicted to heroin and other life-threatening drugs. It is not unusual for them to be called more than once to revive the same person, sometimes in the same week.

One Brisbane paramedic, Ron Henderson, saw the futility of saving the lives of overdose victims only to find them in the same predicament a week or a month later. He and other ambulance officers decided to help heroin addicts break their deadly habit with an initiative that has been described by the director of a drug rehabilitation centre as the best innovation in the fight against drugs in five years.

Under the program paramedics give overdose victims graphic details of how close they came to death and where they can go for help. The information is contained in a brochure which ambulance officers hand to overdose victims once they have been revived. A trial was conducted in Brisbane and the Gold Coast over four months from last November to the end of February. It was a resounding success and widely hailed by drug users and drug rehabilitation workers alike.

During the trial period, Brisbane's Teen Challenge service recorded a marked increase in people calling for help. Calls to Teen Challenge for drug assistance increased from 35% to 59% in that four-month period compared with the same period the previous year. The centre is now expanding its services to cope with the demand. The success of the trial has also prompted the Queensland Ambulance Service to expand the brochure initiative throughout the State. Ambulance officers in Brisbane, Ipswich, Toowoomba, Townsville and on the Gold Coast will be the first to receive the brochures, which will be placed in every emergency ambulance vehicle in the area. The Sunshine Coast, Cairns, Rockhampton and other regional centres will follow.

While the metropolitan areas of Brisbane, the Gold Coast and Ipswich are reporting a majority of the 400-plus cases the QAS attends each year, drugs are a Statewide problem. More than 9,000 people in this State are addicted to heroin. Paramedics hope that their brochure may help some people break the devastating cycle of self-abuse. They believe that the two or three minutes after a patient has been revived provides a unique window of opportunity for them to get home the fact that the person nearly died.

Ambulance officers have reported that many addicts were surprised that someone actually cared about their welfare. It is vital that we get across the message that we do care. We care about the future of our society and we care about the wellbeing of our young children, who are increasingly exposed to all kinds of drugs at a highly impressionable age. It is a war that this Government is

prepared to fight. After all, it is our children's lives that are at stake. The Queensland Ambulance Service brochure initiative is part of a whole-of-Government approach to the problem of drug addiction. It will complement other Government strategies to tackle the issue head-on.

The success of this brochure proves that there are ways we can help heroin addicts break the cycle of abuse. If it saves just one person from a life of desperation, it has been worth it.
