



Speech by

Hon. WENDY EDMOND

MEMBER FOR MOUNT COOT-THA

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DRUG COURT TRIAL

Hon. W. M. EDMOND (Mount Coot-tha— ALP) (Minister for Health) (6.29 p.m.): It is my great pleasure to enter this debate tonight and to support the Government's amendment. It is a damning indictment of our society that, increasingly, drugs are becoming an integral part of life for many Queenslanders. It is an issue that certainly needs a lot more research. We need to know why young people are turning in increasing numbers to the use of drugs.

Alcohol and drug use in our community is a major issue. It is not a new issue by any stretch of the imagination. It has always been around; it is just that, sadly, the community is only now prepared to acknowledge its prevalence and openly and honestly discuss the matter.

To assist members in considering the enormity of the issue and the effectiveness of the Queensland response to date, I would like to provide some figures relating to drug mortality in Queensland compared with the other eastern States. These are figures which, along with an independent review, vindicate our excellent methadone program, the needle availability support program, which so many members opposite seem to want to get rid of, and other initiatives we have in place. Sure, we should look at new initiatives—we should look at new ways of dealing with this problem—but we should also recognise the positive things that are happening and support and keep them, not throw them all out at the same time.

Queensland is achieving the lowest annual rate of death from opiate induced overdoses of any jurisdiction—11 deaths per million of population. This compares with 75 deaths per million in New South Wales and 49 deaths per million in Victoria. While I agree with the Premier that any death is too many, these figures also suggest that any discussion on drugs must include the acknowledgment that there is no one response to deal with the issue of drug and alcohol abuse. The single perfect solution does not exist. Recognising this, we need to ensure that a range of strategies is developed and to address drug use in our community.

By providing a wide range of strategies, we can maximise the likelihood of success through best matching of needs with responses. Available strategies must include abstinence; other prevention options, including education and training; intervention options, including harm reduction and minimisation programs; treatment and rehabilitation. Beyond this, the problem requires other targeted measures, including diversion from the criminal justice system where appropriate, as well as criminal sanctions.

What I have just outlined represents the framework this Government uses to respond to this most complex of issues. It is a framework which is considered relevant and insightful—something members opposite could only dream of coming up with. It is so much easier for those opposite to go for quick, easy and cheap political point scoring or the simplistic, populist approach.

It is a pity that the member for Toowoomba South is leaving the Chamber and is not interested. It is wonderful hearing all this new-found hypocrisy and "let's deal with it in a united way", but over a year ago I publicly offered, as did the now Police Minister, to work with the then Government to come up with solutions that were bipartisan, with all of us working together. I said at the time on 4QR, as publicly as you could get: "Let's work together and look at drug courts. Let's look at trials of different treatment modalities. Let's look at different ways of diverting young people from the system." What did we get? The Minister for Police will tell honourable members that we got a big fat no. The then

Government did not want a cooperative, bipartisan approach. It said: no way. Suddenly, those opposite come in here saying, "Let's have a bipartisan approach. This is above politics. Let's work together." What hypocrisy!

This Government supports the concept of a drug court, but the issue is how it should be established, how it will operate and where it fits within the existing justice equation. We will not be rushed into implementing a program, without careful consideration, just because the Opposition has read the headlines.

At this time, the only Government that has introduced a drug court is the New South Wales Labor Government. It is currently in the midst of a two-year pilot process. The purpose is to divert drug addicted offenders into programs designed to eliminate or reduce drug dependency.

Earlier we heard the member for Toowoomba South saying, "Let's get rid of the drug peddlers." He obviously has not realised that many of the drug peddlers are themselves drug users. This is the best pyramid selling system in the country, because many of the young people who are addicted to drugs then roll up and start selling them to pay for their addiction. It is not people from the Mafia with violin cases who are in the schools selling drugs; it is other kids who have habits. That is why we have to deal with it in that way.

Time expired.
