



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR CAIRNS

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RETRACTABLE NEEDLES

Ms BOYLE (Cairns—ALP) (6.51 p.m.): I am pleased to join this debate, although I do so with mixed feelings about it and about the proceedings in the House today. On the one hand, I am pleased that the honourable members of this Parliament are dealing with issues of considerable community concern, and to that extent I commend the Opposition for raising in the public forum the issue of needle-stick injuries and retractable needles and whether now is the time when we can do more to protect the people of Queensland. That is indeed a worthy issue for us to discuss.

How disappointing, nonetheless, that members opposite have refused to discuss it in some detail and in light of the additional information that this Parliament has heard tonight and in light of the large pool of knowledge available from Queensland Health to members on both sides of the House. Australia and Queensland have policies that have been very successful in stopping the spread of HIV. We are innovators in the world of medicine, and have been for decades. Therefore, this is an important amendment. I encourage all Opposition members to consider whether it would be more worthy for them to look closely at the words rather than to take the automatic, easy, simplistic and disappointing role of just saying "No" because we are the Government. In the first half of the motion, with credit to the Opposition spokesperson, the issue that is of community concern is presented for us. It is worded well, in fact, in terms of "possibly" fatal infection of innocent people, because we should keep in mind that nobody has contracted hepatitis C or HIV through a needle-stick injury.

The amendment proposed by the Government is important. It says, "Yes, we agree—at the appropriate time, when the standards that we have worked by so well as health professionals right across Australia mean that we know which is the best product, which is the retractable needle that will contribute to additional safety for the people of Queensland." As the Minister has well demonstrated to us, she and the department are well across this issue and are working on it, and not only within this State but also, quite appropriately, at the national level. How close are we to that point? Heaven knows how close, but we are not there yet. I encourage the member opposite—as I have noticed some members from the other side of the House have done—to examine with the Minister the specimens available. Of course, when the right product is available, yes, the cost will be a subsidiary factor. But we are yet to find a suitable retractable needle. We are yet to find the best product that really will work, particularly with drug addicts, who are so mindlessly involved in themselves and their drug addiction that they are prepared to discard needles in places where they can cause needle-stick injury and considerable anxiety to members of the public.

This is a matter that I know well. Prior to becoming a member of Parliament, I had a contract to provide counselling and support services to the Cairns City Council. From time to time workers, generally those who worked in keeping the city clean and those who worked in the parks and gardens area, suffered needle-stick injuries. It was as a matter of course that the council referred those workers for one counselling session, with the option of more. The anxiety that they experienced while waiting for the test results was real and dreadfully unpleasant for them and, of course, for the people who love them. But it is an anxiety and only an anxiety that was their problem. None became ill, and I remind the House again of the facts, which are that there is no documented case of a person anywhere in the world contracting HIV or hepatitis C from an unsafely disposed of syringe in a community setting. That is why this Parliament can take the additional time, through the advice of Queensland Health, to find a

retractable needle that will work and to introduce the program as part of national standards at the appropriate time.

All members of this House should join together and work on this issue. Members of the Opposition should bring us further information if they believe we are in fact not up to speed; although on the performance tonight of the Minister and her department, it is clear that we are.

I strongly encourage members to consider this amendment and how it will appear in their electorates if indeed they vote "No", when it is obviously an amendment that all members should endorse.
