



Speech by

KEN TURNER

MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA

Hansard 3 October 2000

CHILD CARE AMENDMENT BILL

Mr TURNER (Thuringowa—IND) (3.19 p.m.): Due to the lack of official legislative guidelines for home-based child care, there is growing concern for the safety and wellbeing of the large number of children in these care situations. There is a definite need to make changes to the Child Care Act that will guarantee the safety and quality of care given to children in this most vulnerable time in their lives.

Legislation should be about placing children in an appropriate environment with a high standard of safety and quality of care, essential to the proper development of children. The Bill as it stands does not address safety and quality of care by home-based carers as a priority but as an afterthought. Essentially, the proposed amendments have four main guidelines that home-based carers must comply with.

Firstly, the carer must have public liability insurance. Yes, public liability insurance is essential, but without the proper safety standards in place and the provision of the highest quality of care this is closing the gate after the horse has bolted. No amount of insurance payout, be it \$5m or \$50m, could compensate for an accident or for the neglect or abuse of an innocent child. The community deserves and expects legislation that will outlaw practices within the home-based child-care service that could place innocent and defenceless children at risk.

Premises must be equipped with standard safety measures—smoke alarms, fire extinguishers, pool fences, padlocks on gates and so on. They must pass an inspection prior to receiving an approval for home care status. Random, regular checks are vital to ensure that safety measures are being properly maintained. Playground equipment and toys, as well as educational and development programs, should also be given close scrutiny during these inspections. All carers must have a current senior first aid certificate. Safety of these children could be compromised by distractions such as visitors, phone calls, crying babies or emergencies.

A single carer should have a backup support worker to call on during emergencies. All home-based carers must be able to provide at least one back-up support worker in cases of emergency. This person could be a neighbour, relative or friend. The Department of Families, Youth and Community Care should also be able to provide a back-up support worker to accommodate any shortfall that may occur during an emergency.

Secondly, the carer must have a criminal history check. A criminal history check is essential for the carer and other adults residing at the premises, but is that going far enough? The lack of a criminal record does not necessarily deem a person capable of handling the demands and responsibilities of caring for young children. We need a more comprehensive outline of the character and capabilities of the person applying for a home carer position.

Monitoring will only be done on a complaints basis. This means that an incident must occur before anything is done. Children will be abused or hurt before any action is taken. By the time a complaint has been lodged, the children concerned will have already been exposed to a preventable incident, possibly leaving the child with permanent physical or psychological damage. We have to set standards that will prevent the need for complaint. Operators must provide at least three relevant references as well as a criminal record check before approval is given.

Thirdly, the person must be 18 years old or over. Provided that the 18 year old has public liability insurance and passes the criminal history check, this person is then allowed to take on the total responsibility for six children, babies included, and care for them in the family home with no supervision, no monitoring and no back-up support. I believe that at 18 years of age a large percentage of teenagers do not have the maturity, experience and tolerance to be able to give the high quality of care required by six children. The final guideline is for no more than six children to be cared for by one home-based carer. I believe this is a good balance, as in Thuringowa we have had reports of up to 15 children in one house with one adult.

There has been a dramatic increase in the number of home-based child-care services in recent years. Eight thousand home-based carers are currently registered with Medicare in Queensland. The major contributing factor to this expansion would have to be the desire of parents seeking family values in a nurturing home environment.

Quality care should provide programs that promote the emotional, intellectual, social and physical development of children. The intent of the legislation should be to prevent children from being placed in inappropriate care. Is the amendment in its current form concise enough to weed out unscrupulous operators and operators whose main concern is for the fast buck rather than the safety and wellbeing of children who have been placed in their care?

These guidelines do not address the quality of care and level of safety that our community expects. We need to reconsider the proposed amendments and develop guidelines that are more accountable and responsive to the needs of our community. We need to respond to the direct needs of families in our busy and diverse working communities.

It is my opinion that all home-based child-care facilities must be registered and have public liability insurance. All carers must have a current senior first aid certificate and provide three references, as well as a criminal record check, before approval is given. A person taking on the responsibility of caring for up to six children—someone else's children—must be 21 years old or over and have a back-up support worker to call on in emergencies.

A simple list of guidelines should be provided, and failure to abide by these basic recommendations should lead to the refusal or withdrawal of home care registration. The carer should be required to provide to parents a copy of the guidelines for a home-based carer business to assist parents in making an informed decision before placing a child in their care. Included should be a simple checklist of safety equipment, playground equipment, health and hygiene and services that the carer provides. The checklist must be completed and signed by both parent and carer when an agreement takes place. This simple procedure would have the effect of making home-based care self-regulating, because what better inspector of a child-care facility could there be than the parents themselves? It would also have the effect of continually bringing to the attention of the home-based carer their responsibilities to children in their care.

Further amendments to the Bill call for the removal of endorsement certificates from the Act and regulations. In the Townsville and Thuringowa area, 63 endorsed staff are filling positions as group leaders, directors and assistant directors in private long day care centres. Forced removal of these staff will place enormous pressures on centres due to the unavailability of qualified people in regional Queensland. Centres in remote areas will have no choice but to close, leaving families without any child-care services. I ask that the endorsement certificate provisions remain in the Act and regulations until such time as there is an abundance of qualified staff.

My final concern relates to the possible introduction of a compulsory Certificate III in children's services for all assistants before they can work in a centre. This will create more hardship for workers who will not be able to afford \$5,000 to attain this certificate at TAFE. All centres depend on relief assistance in the Townsville and Thuringowa region. One hundred and forty-eight assistants would need to complete this certificate. It would cost more than they earn to get their certificate, so there could be a reluctance to work in this industry.

I ask the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care not to introduce a compulsory Certificate III in children's services as this would place enormous pressure on centres. Despite the new trend for college or university training instead of training on the job, this industry appears to be more suited to having much of the training as practical instead of theoretical. I would like to see these suggestions introduced so that this essential child-care industry can continue to grow, whilst ensuring that the safety and wellbeing of our children is the top priority overall. Our most precious assets are children—our next generation—and it is our duty to provide the necessary safety and nurturing to enable them to grow into well-adjusted, happy and caring adults.
