



Speech by

Hon. GORDON NUTTALL

MEMBER FOR SANDGATE

Hansard 30 October 2002

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Skin Penetrating Injuries Audit

Hon. G. R. NUTTALL (Sandgate—ALP) (Minister for Industrial Relations) (10.11 a.m.), by leave: Protecting workers from the dangers of discarded needles and syringes is not just an issue for the health care industry. Workers in many key industries in Queensland are exposed every day to the risks of sharps—by which they are commonly known—which, left unmanaged, can expose workers to the risk of hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV.

This government is keen to ensure that all industries have proper training, risk management processes and reporting mechanisms in place for their workers. That is why inspectors in my department have just completed an audit of 296 workplaces around Queensland. The audit was carried out in the three months from July to September of this year and covered workplaces such as licensed hotels, clubs, accommodation venues and contract cleaning services.

It found that staff at almost half—49 per cent—had reported finding discarded needles and syringes at their workplace, and some workplaces uncovered up to 60 discarded needles a week. These used needles had been found behind toilet cisterns, in bedsheets, in and around sanitary disposal units, and even in an urn used for tea making. Despite this, however, 153 improvement notices had to be issued to more than half the workplaces audited because they failed to have in place a proper system to minimise the risk of injury from these objects.

Specifically, the problem in the majority of cases was that there was a failure to conduct and record a risk assessment; there were no preventative work procedures to minimise skin penetrating injury risks; there were no procedures for the handling and disposing of sharps found; there was a lack of training for workers; and there were a lack of procedures for managing skin penetrating injuries. It is important that employers and employees realise that the proper management of sharps such as needles and syringes is not just a problem for health related industries. Workers in a wide range of industries, as this audit has shown, can be at risk of skin penetrating injuries and employers have an obligation to identify and minimise that risk.

This government has been in consultation with industry and local councils and has several strategies in place to reduce the number of unsafely disposed of syringes in our communities. In fact, all injecting equipment supplied by Queensland Health is supplied with disposable containers, such as this one.

I have said before in this parliament that this government is not just about improved compliance with the law, it strongly encourages greater education among employers and employees to ensure that workplaces are safe. So today I am encouraging all employers to take part in the 22 statewide workshops that my department will now be holding from the Gold Coast to Mount Isa during November and December on this very important issue. The seminars will start Monday week, on 11 November. They will run over three hours and feature panel discussions with members drawn from the Queensland Hotels Association; the Australian Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union; the Brisbane City Council, Queensland Health's Public Health Unit; and the Alcohol and Drug Information Service.

These seminars will spell out the findings of this audit, how the Workplace Health and Safety Act applies to workplaces in regard to managing sharps, and the five-step process to minimise the risks that these devices pose to both employees and employers. Anyone wishing to attend should contact the Division of Workplace Health and Safety for advice.