



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

Hansard Tuesday, 17 August 2010

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—LNP) (12.12 pm): Two articles in the *Sunday Mail* on 14 August by Kathleen Donaghey touched on issues that I have been pursuing in this place in respect of autism spectrum disorder. These two articles seriously question the Bligh government's handling of the issue of ASD in Queensland amongst children and challenge the claims by the Minister for Disability Services that early intervention services for autism are a priority for the Bligh government, and I table the articles.

Tabled paper: Articles from the *Sunday Mail*, dated 15 August 2010, titled 'Autism diagnosis doubt' and 'A hidden condition' [[2752](#)].

The articles quote autism expert Dr Glenys Jones from the University of Birmingham describing Queensland's two per cent of state school students last year being diagnosed with autism—a rate double that of the United Kingdom—as excessive and worrying. The articles also quote Professor Tony Attwood, an autism expert based in Brisbane, describing Queensland's two per cent diagnosis rate as excessive by world standards and asserting that either something in Queensland is creating an epidemic or something is happening in the diagnosis that needs to be checked.

The fact is in Queensland the Bligh government is not capable of determining whether it is one or the other because it does not have any reliable data to make an informed decision. During the hearing of Estimates Committee D on 16 July I referred to a 2007 report from the Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders that stated that it could not use Queensland figures because Education Queensland declined to provide any data on the basis that there is no nationally agreed definition of autism and Disability Services Queensland did not keep ASD specific statistics. The articles revealed that a review into Queensland's high rate of autism was ordered by the then minister for education, Rod Welford, but that this review did not go ahead. Evidently, no effort was made by DSQ to secure reliable data in respect of the prevalence of ASD amongst young Queenslanders.

When I asked Minister Palaszczuk on 16 July about needs based mapping, the minister confirmed that needs based mapping has only been happening now in 2010—three years after the advisory board revealed Queensland's data shortcomings. I also asked the minister, given that no needs based mapping had been done, on what basis DSQ had been allocating funding to meet the needs of Queensland children with ASD to this point in time. I acknowledged that the minister can point to funding provided to Autism Queensland and the AEIOU Foundation and the delivery of early intervention services in places like Bundaberg and Mackay and, as we heard this morning, the Sunshine Coast, and I welcome these allocations. However, what the advisory board report confirms and what this article reveals is that there is no rhyme or reason—no scientific rationale—behind DSQ's haphazard funding for early intervention services for ASD across Queensland.

What I want to know is how has the Bligh government been making its decisions about how to fund early intervention services for ASD in Queensland. In April this year I asked Minister Palaszczuk why the Bligh government was refusing to provide funding to Waminda Services in Dalby, a local disability services provider delivering services to the Western Downs and the Surat Basin. The minister did not answer my question in April and the minister did not answer my question when I asked her again during the estimates hearing on 16 July. The truth is that the minister did not answer my question because she cannot answer

my question. The minister cannot tell this parliament or the parents of Queensland children with ASD why DSQ is prepared to fund the AEIOU Foundation and Autism Queensland but not Waminda Services, and that is the crux of the problem in Queensland and the reason I am concerned.

While the minister has described the AEIOU Foundation and Autism Queensland as the major providers of early intervention services that have the capacity to deliver, there are other local providers of support services that have the capacity to deliver to their local communities. While I certainly wanted to draw to the attention of the House the plight of Waminda Services in Dalby, the parallel point that I have been trying to make is that the Bligh government cannot and has not been making genuinely needs based funding decisions because there is no needs based mapping data for ASD.

In terms of delivering early intervention services for autism in Queensland, we are flying blind, feeling our way through and responding in an ad hoc fashion to an enormous outpouring of competing demands for support services across the state driven by a diagnosis rate double that of comparable jurisdictions that has been described by experts as excessive and worrying. The experts have been questioning the policies of the Bligh government in respect of who can diagnose ASD amongst children in Queensland and how resources are subsequently allocated. I thank Kathleen Donaghey for underlining the questions that I have been asking.