

Division 32: Chemistry Centre (WA) —

Mr S.J. Price, Chair.

Ms J.L. Hanns, Parliamentary Secretary representing the Minister for Science.

Ms L. Barbato, Acting Chief Executive Officer.

Ms B. Douglas, Director, Forensic Science.

Mr S. Anicic, Chief Financial Officer.

Mr J. Stokes, Senior Policy Adviser.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: The estimates committees will be reported by Hansard and the daily proof will be available online as soon as possible within two business days. The chair will allow as many questions as possible. Questions and answers should be short and to the point. Consideration is restricted to items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must relate to a page number, item or amount related to the current division, and members should preface their questions with those details. Some divisions are the responsibility of more than one minister. Ministers shall be examined only in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

A minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee. I will ask the minister to clearly indicate what information they agree to provide and will then allocate a reference number. Supplementary information should be provided to the principal clerk by noon on Friday, 31 May 2024. If a minister suggests that a matter be put on notice, members should use the online questions on notice system to submit their questions.

I give the call to the member for Vasse.

Ms L. METTAM: I refer to page 480, “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency”, paragraph 8, and the Chemistry Centre’s collaboration with the Western Australia Police Force and Royal Perth Hospital in studies around drink spiking. Is the Chemistry Centre witnessing a trend of more egregious drugs being used to spike drinks compared with what has been traditionally used?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I will direct the question to the director for forensics.

Ms B. Douglas: We test for a broad range of substances that encounter newly emerging drugs that are seen in international and local markets, but we are not observing any particular trends in the types of drugs being detected and the overall detection rates in the drink spiking initiative.

Ms L. METTAM: There has not been an increase in the variety of drugs, but what is the measure of the increase in the use of drink spiking in the community?

Ms J.L. HANNS: Testing commenced in August 2022, so there have been 260 cases to date. There has not been enough time to understand the results of that particular initiative or the trends, sorry.

Ms L. METTAM: I appreciate that the government has not had the opportunity to work out what the overall trends may be, but are there any plans to roll out services or implement a program in response to some of the initial findings as part of this program?

Ms J.L. HANNS: The centre offers a very robust analysis of exactly what the member is talking about in terms of testing. The question around programs and initiatives really would fall under the jurisdiction of the police, so it would be up to the police as to what work they might want to do or what programs they might want to look into expanding.

Ms L. METTAM: In terms of the analysis and the 260 cases, what is the objective? Is it just to identify whether drink spiking has taken place or is further research being undertaken?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I will defer that to the director of forensics.

Ms B. Douglas: The purpose behind the initiative was to provide a mechanism for people who suspect that they may have been subject to a drink spiking event to have a sample taken, particularly when it was not necessarily going to go down a normal criminal investigation path. That was the incentive behind the initiative. It is so people could present at a police station, and have a sample taken and collected. It would be provided to us for analysis. It was more around understanding the prevalence of drink spiking and, if it is prevalent, the types of drugs used. The incentive behind the initiative was to be able to provide that opportunity to the community around having an avenue to have their suspicions or anything like that investigated further. It would then be referred back to police so our results would go back to police for them to further investigate with the complainant.

Ms L. METTAM: A final question: is this funding ongoing? How much is the funding for the program?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I defer to the acting chief executive officer.

Ms L. Barbato: It forms part of the services that we provide to WA police. It is just part of a suite of services and cases that we test on behalf of police. It is scalable. Police have a memorandum of understanding with us and they increase their service demands as they take on different campaigns and directions depending on what their priorities are.

Ms L. METTAM: I said that was the last question, but there is one more. Is the ChemCentre meeting current demand or is there more it could provide?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I would like to say, firstly, that the ChemCentre’s toxicology scientists have provided WA police and hospital staff with kits to test a suitable sample to determine whether drink spiking has occurred. Testing kits are now also available 24/7 at all metropolitan and regional police stations across WA in an Australian-first initiative. As to further information on that question, I am happy to direct that to the director of forensic science.

Ms B. Douglas: In terms of the drink spiking initiative, yes, the laboratory is keeping up with demand. We provide early information back to the police investigators as intelligence and then follow up with more evidential reporting back to them. The laboratory is meeting the demands of that initiative, yes.

Ms L. METTAM: I am never saying “a further question” again! Is demand increasing? I know it is early days with 260 cases.

Ms J.L. HANNS: With respect, member, as the acting chief executive officer said previously, it is very early days for that program. Probably we would have some further data for the member this time next year in the estimates hearings.

Dr D.J. HONEY: In a very brief *Readers Digest* fashion, clearly, given the time—parliamentary secretary, the four-year forensic research project aimed at developing the protein-based human identification procedure sounds very exciting. I wonder whether we could have a quick update of its progress. Is a test now available for police to use or is it still something that is being developed and improved by the centre?

Ms J.L. HANNS: Given the time, I am happy for the acting chief executive officer to provide the response.

Ms L. Barbato: Thank you for the question. The government provided \$4.6 million over four years to develop this new forensic technique in WA, which provides rapid definitive human identification from single hair shafts. This has been undertaken with a number of universities and organisations—Edith Cowan University, Murdoch University, the Western Australia Police Force, PathWest, the University of California and Fiona Stanley Hospital. The project is on track and, by the end of 2025, we will move beyond the investigative and validation phase. By 2026, we expect to start using this technique on some preliminary cases. It is a very exciting project and our scientists are definitely very excited about the project in that it will allow for the WA community to open cold cases. It will support forensic testing of active cases and it will provide a new identification for disaster victims and missing persons. It provides very significant forensic advancements for the state and for the community and its IP will reside in WA, which will allow the commercialisation as a technique to be made available to other jurisdictions. This is very innovative, groundbreaking forensic science that the ChemCentre is embarking on and we are very proud to be able to do that here in WA.

The CHAIR: Thank you, members. We have run out of time.

Ms J.L. HANNS: Can I say thank you very much to the advisers.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you, parliamentary secretary.

The appropriation was recommended.

Committee adjourned at 10.00 pm
