

CORRECTIVE SERVICES — FOETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDER SCREENING TOOL

Statement by Minister for Corrective Services

MR J.M. FRANCIS (Jandakot — Minister for Corrective Services) [9.08 am]: Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, or FASD, is a terrible disorder that can rob young people of their future. FASD is caused by foetal exposure to alcohol. It is a spectrum disorder that can produce a range of symptoms, including behavioural issues, learning problems, physical problems and deformities and intellectual impairment. FASD does not discriminate; indeed, it can affect young people living in the affluent suburbs of Perth just as easily as it can ruin the lives of young people from the most remote parts of our north.

Research from Australia and other parts of the world tells us that young people with FASD are much more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system than are other young people. Once they come into the system, they do not tend to fare well. Young people with FASD often have poor impulse control and short attention spans. They can be hyperactive and frequently suffer from nervousness and anxiety, which means that they are more likely to miss appointments and fail to stick to rehabilitation regimes. Generally, they are also more likely to be led astray. All this adds up to a simple fact; that is, a child with FASD is much less likely to be diverted away from the justice system and is much more likely to end up in detention. We do not know how many young people in the justice system are affected by FASD. Anecdotal estimates put the figure at around 30 per cent, but we do not know for sure because no FASD screening tool is available in Australia. Detailed diagnostic tools are available in Australia, but these require rigorous specialised testing that needs to take place within a medical setting. This sort of testing is neither feasible nor useful in a youth justice setting. A FASD screening tool is needed that can be used by Department of Corrective Services staff to identify FASD in young people as early as possible so that the justice system can deal with them more appropriately.

I am pleased to inform the house that a team of researchers from Telethon Kids Institute is undertaking, in partnership with the Department of Corrective Services, to develop a foetal alcohol spectrum disorder screening tool. This screening tool will be unique in that it is being developed specifically for use on the Australian population. The department is finalising the scope of the research, and it is anticipated that a pilot will commence at Banksia Hill Juvenile Detention Centre in February 2015. The Youth Justice Board will be provided with updates as the project progresses. The research is being funded by a grant from the National Health and Medical Research Council. All medical and research ethics requirements have been satisfied. Although community safety will always be paramount, I see no point in simply punishing young people with FASD instead of attempting to identify and treat them. This research marks the beginning of such an approach.