

YWCA AUSTRALIA ENCORE PROGRAM

Grievance

MRS L.M. HARVEY (Scarborough — Parliamentary Secretary) [9.22 am]: My grievance today is directed to the Minister for Health and relates to funding for the Young Women's Christian Association's Encore program. The YWCA Encore program has been specially designed for women who have had breast cancer treatment. The program involves a unique combination of hydrotherapy, resistance exercises and floor-based exercises, in conjunction with a group discussion and information session. The program is run by the YWCA Australia-wide. In 2010, Encore celebrated 25 years in Australia, having supported more than 6 000 women. The program is free for breast cancer survivors, who need only a medical referral to attend. At a time when a woman may have undergone surgery or radiotherapy or chemotherapy treatment, all of which are costly medical procedures, it is a relief to have a program offered for free.

Historically, funding came from a diverse range of sponsors but with Avon as a major corporate donor. Unfortunately, in late 2009, Avon had to reduce this contribution, but I would like to gratefully acknowledge its continued support. This change in financial support at the national level has meant that the WA Encore program may need to start charging a fee for women to access this support program. At the same time, the federal Labor government decided not to continue funding the valuable regional services offered by Encore. Albany, Bunbury and Geraldton offer this wonderful program for local women. I understand that the Albany program in particular is a great success, yet the federal Labor government ceased funding, potentially changing it from a free program to a chargeable service. These women have had to travel from Albany to Perth for repeated treatments, have had to find accommodation while undergoing ongoing treatment and have been away from their families and loved ones and have then returned home. It is inexcusable that federal Labor finds it acceptable to force a charge on a local support service. When a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer, what follows is a continual adjustment process, both physically and psychologically. This adjustment does not happen for just a couple of months; it can occur for years. After treatment, many women experience numbness, pins and needles, a loss of mobility and strength, and discomfort in their upper bodies. When the raft of physical symptoms from treatment and the potential loss of a breast through surgery are combined with the devastating news that a woman's long-held belief of being a healthy individual no longer exists, it becomes an extraordinarily difficult time. For many women, managing this adjustment is done not just for themselves, but also for their husbands and their children.

There are several means by which a woman recovering from breast cancer can enhance her psychological wellbeing and improve her survivorship. Maintaining physical fitness, eating well and social interaction with other breast cancer survivors are important components of long-term survivorship. It is not uncommon for women to become sedentary after surgery and treatment. Physical discomfort, combined with uncertainty about what is a safe and effective exercise regime, is a deterrent. A lack of confidence in being able to do the exercises is a very important factor. Unfortunately, this contributes to levels of fatigue and, in turn, this increases psychological distress. Attending a hospital rehabilitation program is feasible only if a woman lives near a hospital. Home-based programs provide the exercise but do not have the peer support of fellow survivors. During an eight-week program of two-hour sessions, Encore incorporates exercise, relaxation, meditation services, support and information. Participants take home exercise sheets each week. The classes are deliberately kept small, with between six and 14 participants, and are run by a fully trained YWCA Encore coordinator.

Encore helps women with the after-effects of breast cancer surgery and treatment, helping to restore strength, mobility, flexibility, confidence and general wellbeing. Women of any age who have had a mastectomy, lumpectomy or breast reconstructive surgery at any time in their lives can undertake these specifically designed, gentle floor and pool-based exercises. Building confidence to undertake the exercises allows a woman's self-efficacy to grow. Self-efficacy, or self-belief to achieve a certain level of performance, is vital if a health support program is to work. It also provides the opportunity for women to share their experiences, concerns and feelings in a safe and supportive environment. The sharing and sense of belonging play an important role in the recovery process. Being part of a group of people who have shared the shock of diagnosis, the experience of treatment and the sadness and distress of family and loved ones is a vital part of recovery. There are many exercise programs but most of them are aerobically based. Encore is unique because of its resistance exercises. It is also unique because it incorporates a group discussion and information session. These facets of the program have been psychologically evaluated and shown to be effective. The study was published in the *Journal of Behavioural Medicine*, which I am happy to table for interested members to read. I quote from page 378 of the study, which states —

These findings provide evidence for psychosocial benefits of YWCA *Encore* multi-component program and support the use of such community-based programs for breast cancer survivors.

Encore is run in the metropolitan area and in regional centres. It is therefore accessible to many women from many diverse areas. It is not dependent on women living near a hospital, and it is not done in the isolation of the home, allowing for vital social interaction. Marketing of the program is twofold, with promotion direct to breast cancer survivors and also to health professionals for recommendation to patients. If it has been more than eight weeks since surgery, any woman can attend, regardless of how many years it has been since treatment; for instance, a woman who had surgery 30 years ago can attend an Encore program.

I call on the Minister for Health to recognise the valuable role that the YWCA Encore program plays in the difficult process of recovery from breast cancer. In the public gallery today are some of the women responsible for this fantastic program in Western Australia. I recognise Beth Keely, the YWCA Encore coordinator, who has dedicated an enormous amount of time to the program. Thank you for your tireless efforts in keeping Encore available to Western Australian women. Also in the public gallery is a vibrant, energetic constituent, Ethel Adams, who is responsible for bringing Encore and its plight to my attention. This program should remain free to breast cancer survivors. When there is a proven psychological benefit of just how effective the program is, government can be assured of a very wise investment. Breast cancer, as we know, is a common cancer among Australian women, and, as we have just heard from the member for Victoria Park, the consequences can be devastating.

The SPEAKER: Member for Scarborough, you indicated that you had a document that you wished to table. I instruct that that be tabled for the remainder of this day's sitting.

[The paper was tabled for the information of members.]

DR K.D. HAMES (Dawesville — Minister for Health) [9.29 am]: I thank the member for Scarborough for bringing this matter to the attention of Parliament and me. She has gone through in great detail the issues of women who have had surgery as a result of breast cancer, and also the role of Encore and the services that it provides. I thought I might give my perspective as a general practitioner on some of the difficulties of managing patients who have had breast cancer. Going through that awful process of diagnosis and advising patients that they have breast cancer is a dreadful thing to have to do, I can tell members. I would like to focus on the long-term management and what happens post-surgery to women who have had breast cancer. That surgery can range from something as simple as a lumpectomy, which is the removal of the cancer itself, to a radical procedure called a mastectomy, which involves the total removal of the breast. Another procedure is the radical removal of all the drainage lymph nodes under the arm. As a result of that procedure, people can develop lymphoedema, meaning fluid pools in the arm and is unable to drain, and one arm can be double the size of the other.

General practitioners deal with two aspects that arise from medical conditions: the physical aspect and the psychological aspect. Physically, it is very important to maintain the mobility and flexibility of the arm and undergo physiotherapy and engage in physical activity to help improve drainage and retain the mobility of that site. But the second, and probably the most important, aspect is the psychological aspect. Often, if a woman has had to have a breast removed, the relationship between her and her partner can be affected, because obviously breasts are part of sexual attraction and women often feel they lose their sexual attraction after the breast has been removed. Also, their role as a mother can be affected because breasts obviously play an integral role in that responsibility, and they feel in some sense that having a breast taken away from them makes them not as much of a mother as they were. Those things are very difficult for women to cope with following that sort of surgery.

Encore provides a critical service that helps women back to full flexibility and mobility, but even more critically, it gets women together who have been in similar circumstances and provides a place where they can sit down and talk through things and gain reassurance as to their future and learn about regaining their self-confidence and self-esteem. It is a critical program and it was sad to see that it was about to struggle as a result of the reduced funding from Avon, which had previously funded it up until the end of last year. I think it is amazing that such a service could be provided this way; there are not too many things in life that are free, but for these women who have been struggling through such great difficulty, to have a program that can be accessed free of charge was a great boon to them.

The member for Scarborough approached me and the Department of Health to see what could be done to help and whether the government could provide assistance to enable that program to continue. What has happened since then might be regarded as a very rare occurrence, because the amount of money they asked for was reckoned by us to not actually be enough. The original amount requested was \$48 000, but after a thorough assessment of the requirements of that group it became clear that the requested funding was inadequate, and we have now committed to an increased amount of \$64 600 to enable that program to continue free of charge. That funding will start from July, and the YWCA will be able to continue its scheduled program, which is set by itself, not by the government. The program will be in Shenton Park from 9 February to 30 March 2012, 18 May to 6 July 2012, and 19 October to 7 December 2012; in Riverton from 18 February 2012 to 8 April 2012; in Fremantle on dates to be arranged; and, regionally, in Albany from 14 February 2012 to 5 April 2012, and in

Geraldton on dates still to be arranged. That program provides a good broad coverage of the state, and I think it is a program that should be expanded. I will be looking at ways in which we can provide opportunities for it to expand to the rest of the state so that women will have access to that program throughout Western Australia. It is critical that we support programs like this one, and I am very proud that our government has been able to respond to the request of the member for Scarborough and provide that critical support.