

NATIONAL ASBESTOS DISEASE AWARENESS WEEK

Motion

HON JON FORD (Mining and Pastoral) [10.17 am] — without notice: I move —

That the Legislative Council notes that it is National Asbestos Disease Awareness Week and notes the devastating effect that the long-term mining and use of this deadly substance has had on many Western Australians and will continue to have in the future; and calls on the Barnett government to detail what plans and actions it will implement to clean up and to mitigate the effects of asbestos in Western Australia.

The Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia has held a memorial church service every year since 1996. Again tomorrow this service will be held. Sadly, since 1996 the Asbestos Diseases Society has lost 2 795 members through asbestos-related diseases. In 2010, there were 270 deaths related to this deadly fibre. Before I continue, I must recognise the tireless work and advocacy of Mr Robert Vojakovic in raising issues and awareness about this industrial plague and this plague on our society and in supporting victims of its insidious diseases. He is a credit to us all. There would not be a member in this chamber who has not heard him talk on this subject. He is a very, very passionate man. Mr Vojakovic estimates that it is conceivable that as many as 2 000 people died from exposure to the fibre prior to records starting in 1996. I will quote from a paper he gave me to show the nature, size and context of the issue —

Australia first began importing asbestos products from Poisy, France in 1903. In November 1916, Wunderlich Limited began manufacturing asbestos products in Australia and six months later James Hardie commenced their production of asbestos cement products. From 1943 to 1966, more than 160, 000 tonnes of blue asbestos fibres was produced at the Wittenoom CSR owned blue asbestos mine and mill.

A fibre sheet is quite diluted. My understanding is that about 35 per cent of an asbestos sheet contains asbestos fibre. That gives members an idea of how much of this fibre is in the community. It is recognised medically and scientifically that there is the potential for any number of asbestos-related diseases to occur with the ingestion of just one asbestos fibre. We all pass away from this earth with fibres in our lungs. That is the nature of life. Just one asbestos fibre can cause a person to die. It is like holding a loaded gun and playing Russian roulette. The paper continues —

It would not be until mid 1985 when James Hardie and other asbestos product manufacturers would take asbestos fibre out of their products. Sadly by then thousands of workers and the community at large had been exposed to deadly asbestos fibre ... **The exact figures** —

That is, of the amount of people in Australia who have been exposed to and infected by asbestos and who have died from an asbestos-related disease —

are very conservative because many lung cancer deaths are erroneously diagnosed as being caused by tobacco smoking.

The widespread —

Nature —

of asbestos diseases in Western Australia has reached even those who had trivial and remote in time exposure to asbestos in a non-occupational setting.

That is very relevant to Australians, but to Western Australians in particular. It is feared that the next tranche of people who will have asbestos-related diseases will be those who have come into contact with asbestos through doing home renovations. That includes everything from taking out walls, replacing walls, drilling through walls, replastering and replacing fences. I am advised also that the latest danger is that people will be exposed to and ingest asbestos fibres when they replace the underfelt of their carpet in older homes that were built in the 1950s and 1960s because the underfelt was made, in part, from old hessian bags that were used for carting asbestos fibres.

It was not very long ago, in an industrial sense, that people who worked out and about, particularly in the trades, were exposed to asbestos. In the 1970s, I was lagging pipes and boiler rooms in hangers. I poured white asbestos into a plaster of Paris lag for pipes as a form of insulation. Later, I worked for companies that made dog spikes and rail plates and I sat in furnaces and pulled out asbestos wool that was used to manufacture those furnaces. As late as 1989, when I worked for Woodside, I changed asbestos gaskets. Even then, although everyone knew that asbestos was something to be cautious of, the knowledge of the risk involved was not widely recognised. That is why it is important to have a time when we recognise the dangers associated with asbestos. As part of our

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occupational health and safety procedures at Woodside we were told that when we pulled apart a pipe, we would have to spray water on it before we removed the asbestos gasket, which we did. We pulled off the spiral wound surface that helped seal the pipe against the gasket, which we would wet and clean. We would chuck the old gasket into the back of the ute, along with the rag we used to clean it, and at the end of the week we would clean out the ute. There could have been 30 or 40 grams of asbestos rattling around in the back of the ute. It is the old case of thinking, "I can't see the immediate effect of this, so it probably won't hurt me." After the introduction of legislation, all asbestos gaskets were required to be removed and replaced with alternative materials, which in that case was Graphoil. I am pretty confident that in most hydrocarbon and steam plants around the state today we would not find many asbestos gaskets. During that time, I remember reading a study in my union paper that said there was a higher risk of exposure to asbestos when walking down George Street because of the brake linings used in cars than there was in an occupational sense. Of course, asbestos is no longer used in clutch linings, and that risk has been greatly reduced. We live and learn over time. The reality is that tens of thousands of tonnes of asbestos exist in building products around Australia and Western Australia.

I again refer to the papers given to me by the Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia, to give members an idea of the extent of the issue. The paper further states —

The combination of asbestos and cement created revolutionary building products. In particular, flat and corrugated "Asbestos Cement Sheeting" was widely adopted as a standard building material in industrial and residential building projects in the 30's, 40's, 50's, 60's, 70's and up to mid 80's. These products were seen as an extremely cheap and versatile alternative to conventional building materials and, in many instances, the "fibro" construction completely replaced the brick and tile approach to building.

We all know that. When we drive around the suburbs of Perth, we can see that some suburbs are largely constructed from asbestos fibre sheets. The paper continues —

It is estimated that the Australian asbestos manufacturers produced in excess of **1.4 billion square metres** of asbestos cement sheeting between 1903 and 1983 and almost that entire product has been used in buildings around Australia. It is further estimated that at least thirty percent of that figure was corrugated asbestos sheeting (which was commonly used as roofing and fencing material).

Since then, of course, the danger of asbestos has been recognised legally in statutes, and by big compensation payouts. In Parliament we have participated in debates to protect victims of asbestos-related disease and to modify occupational health and safety procedures, regulations and laws to mitigate that risk. Consecutive governments have done various things to try to mitigate that effect. The previous government had a red-hot go at doing something about Wittenoom, which is probably Western Australia's most contaminated site. We tried to encourage people to move out of that town and de-gazette the town so that when those people had moved out, we could look at what could be done to clean-up the contamination. Especially members from that area would know that every time it rains, great swathes of asbestos are washed down through Mulga Downs across the planes and down towards Millstream. We must either seal the site and dump soil over it or pull out the asbestos and bury it. Certainly we must exclude people from going there. We have to do something and it will cost a lot of money. That site will continue to contaminate that area of our state. We are lucky in many senses that it is a remote area but we are unlucky that it is also one of the most traversed areas by tourists, so it is an issue that cannot be ignored.

The problem with asbestos is that it has left a legacy that has vexed governments all around Australia. Why is that? It is such a large and very, very difficult problem that it is cost prohibitive. It is not easy to look at a property and decide whether or not it contains asbestos sheets, especially for the lay person. In most cases we need to have it analysed. The removal of asbestos sheeting is cost prohibitive and there are lots of very strict rules about handling it. Unfortunately, to avoid paying those costs some home renovators illegally dump it or try to hide it with other rubbish when they take it to their local tip. It is certainly a problem local governments cannot afford to deal with on their own sites. If we were to pass laws in this place that not only banned the use of asbestos in building products, but also mandated a date for the removal of all asbestos, local governments could not afford it; indeed, the state government could not afford it without sacrificing other important programs. It is a matter that has to be dealt with in a cross-jurisdictional way by local governments, state governments and the commonwealth. Until someone other than Mr Vojakovic starts advocating for that to be done, it will not happen.

One thing is for certain; it just cannot be ignored, because while we ignore it, people will die from it. When we hear the legalistic arguments about people who are affected by asbestos, a whole lot of time is spent in the court directions and during the court cases arguing that it cannot be demonstrably proved that a person is dying from a particular disease because of some exposure to asbestos. We have made that a lot easier; indeed, we passed laws in this place recently to deal with that, and I congratulate the government for that. But that argument will still be

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made, because if someone has something wrong with their chest, as the Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia pointed out, and the person is or has been a smoker, it is easy to say that the illness is smoking related. But we have also found that people who have never had an occupational exposure to asbestos can also be affected by it. We are finding that children whose parents were involved in the industry are being affected by asbestos-related diseases. We are finding that the partners of people who worked in the industry are getting sick as a result of cleaning their partner's clothes. Indeed, when I started looking at the issue of asbestos, it caused me to worry about the exposure I have given to my children during my time working in Tom Price. In those days Wittenoom was an open place; it was a watering hole and a social gathering place for many people, particularly on Wittenoom Cup day. I have witnessed asbestos drum filling, and to make the track easier for the horses to run on, asbestos used to be spread over the track. That is in my living memory. I worry about it. I took my children along to those areas and I hope they have not been exposed in a manner that will cause them illness and discomfort later in their lives. I worry about my time in the Air Force and about my colleagues whom I was in the Air Force with. We wore no protective gear because it was not the done thing. Having recognised those aspects, it seems to me that we cannot ignore that. Every moment we are currently debating this and not doing more to have a coordinated approach in continuing to seal off areas of asbestos to identify or to remove it and bury it, more people will die over time. I think it is time we actually had a coordinated approach to dealing with asbestos. It needs to have a non-partisan, long-term approach. It is not an issue we can suddenly make an election promise on by saying we will remove all asbestos fencing and roofing, but we can have a plan for how we will deal with it over time. It will be interesting to hear the government's views on that.

Then there is the issue I have been talking about in this house for some time. Currently, within the resource sector, it is not a requirement—in fact we are not allowed to—see asbestos management plans as they relate to companies in the iron ore industry, particularly where there is magnetite. It is interesting that where magnetite exists versus haematite, there is always an elevated exposure to asbestos. At a lot of the new mines opening up, such as those at Cape Preston and others, that have relatively low grades of iron ore there are elevated levels of asbestos. I think it is high time those mitigations were made public. It is not with a view to causing industrial unrest or damage to the reputation of those companies; it is to measure the effectiveness of those management plans in the future and over time. We need to do that. We need to review the asbestos management plans for public sector buildings. Massive works have been undertaken by many governments over time, including stripping down and gutting Dumas House and the Perth local government building. A lot of public buildings have been gutted completely and all the asbestos removed and replaced. It is a costly exercise, but I think it sends a good signal, and there is more of that to come.

Perhaps we need to provide a subsidy or find other measures to encourage home renovators and private citizens, generally, to not dump asbestos-related products in the bush. We need to make it easier for them by encouraging and assisting them to comply with the rules and get rid of asbestos products from their houses. We certainly need to raise their awareness about what they could be exposed to. I did not realise how widespread the problem is.

[Member's time expired.]

Point of Order

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Is there the capacity to offer an extension of time? I think the member wanted to say a little more. I will be interested to hear whether there is a possibility for a brief extension. Does the member want a few more minutes?

Hon Jon Ford: A minute, but I might get a reply.

The PRESIDENT: I guess, at the end of the day, it is up to the house to determine what it wants to do. This is a fixed debating time for a specific motion. If you start to adopt a practice of permitting an extension of members' times, that will erode into other areas of opportunity to make comments in the debate. Without dogmatically ruling against it, I advise against it.

Debate Resumed

HON SIMON O'BRIEN (South Metropolitan — Minister for Finance) [10.39 am]: Thank you for your advice just now, Mr President. It is probably useful to have that advice given to the house now in a non-heated environment because it will help advise us in the future. What you said, Mr President, was very wise, and I appreciate the advice. My motivation was that I thought the member had a little more to say, and what he was saying was making a lot of sense and he was speaking in a non-confrontational way, so the intention was to extend a courtesy.

Hon Jon Ford: I appreciate that.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Having said that, I am not going to move for any suspension of standing orders for him to say any more, because apparently he had just about finished.

I listened closely to the words of Hon Jon Ford, and I was rather pleased with what I heard. There is almost a tradition in this house that non-government business time is when whoever has the business of the moment at hand uses it as an opportunity to attack the government or condemn the government or some such thing. I did not hear any of that in the words of the honourable member, which makes a change. I am sure it is not going to become typical of non-government business, but it did make a change, and I want to acknowledge that. I will be responding in a similar demeanour. I hope I have not diminished the member in his colleagues' eyes.

Hon Jon Ford: It's all over for me now, I can tell you.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I join with the mover in acknowledging a number of things, and the first is the manner in which in past days in this state we have, through a lack of understanding at the time, behaved in a completely cavalier way in how we employed asbestos, how we extracted it from the ground and what we did about cleaning it up. I note also, with sadness, the enduring effects of that—the enduring effects that we have seen in the heartbreaking statistics of the fatalities that have occurred, which we were reminded of; the enduring effects that lurk in many, many different locations as a result of asbestos residue or old, friable asbestos being in our environment, whether it is by historical stocks of the stuff deteriorating and releasing fibres in the presence of humans or whether it is old asbestos that has recently been removed and dumped in the bush as a totally inadequate form of disposal of this essentially dangerous material; and also consideration about what we do in the future as we contemplate the legacy of asbestos, particularly as a building material, being in the very fabric of the built environment that we inhabit. Of course, when buildings this week, next year or in 50 years have to be renovated or demolished or dealt with in some way that brings those involved into contact with friable asbestos, it may then release fibres that may pose a hazard to people of all ages in the community, whether it be at the immediate location, along a transport route, or in or around some other disposal point. All those issues are important, all of them are live and enduring, and all of them need ongoing attention. So the member is quite correct in what he described.

None of this was in the motion of which we had notice, so I was listening with interest partly to find out the direction that the member's remarks would take, because several members on this side have some responsibilities in these affairs. I think Hon Wendy Duncan may have some comments to make from the point of view of the Department of Regional Development and Lands or the Minister for Lands. I am sure that Hon Helen Morton, speaking on behalf of the government health sector, will have some remarks to make. I also listened with interest to Hon Jon Ford's comments about occupational health and safety matters and compensation matters, and I think he referred to some recent legislation that he had assisted in passing, which was some WorkCover legislation that I had introduced into the house. I thank the member for his support on that occasion and also for his kind remarks just now.

In addition to the occupational health and safety aspects of my portfolio, I am also minister with responsibility for Building Management and Works. That is now part of the Department of Finance, which we created on 1 July this year. As such, I think I am the nominal owner, for the moment, of a few thousand non-residential government buildings. They are of all shapes and sizes, in all locations, and of all different vintages. For example, the Barracks Arch is a building that is under my control, as are the old Fremantle Prison, Dumas House, Hale House and many others besides. We have to do all sorts of things with these buildings as they enter a certain age. Dumas House has already received a mention this morning, so let me use that one as an example. Some extensive renovations are occurring at Dumas House at this time. On other occasions, no doubt we will be debating or revisiting questions of cost of outfitting government offices, because it seems to be a very popular thing to spend a dollar on government buildings—a bit like Parliament House. Nonetheless, we have to do that, because if we were to just say that we will neglect Dumas House and build another brand-new Dumas House next door instead, that would cost us a staggering amount of money. It is far better to spend tens of millions of dollars, rather than hundreds of millions of dollars, to refurbish what we have, and give it a life span whereby it will last indefinitely if we preserve the fabric.

One of the reasons why it costs quite a lot, in addition to the scale of the project, is that revamping the building in 2011–12 is a very different exercise from that of building it in the 1960s because of the standards that have to be met. Members will not be surprised to learn that I accept very willingly the responsibility to make sure that the building in every respect meets all disability access requirements, which are not only laid down in statute, but also endorsed, I am sure, by all sides of the house in terms of policy and spirit of inclusiveness. But that costs money. Similarly, the fire systems in that whole building are grossly inadequate, not historically, but under today's standards. Therefore, when we are embarking on an operation of that size, we have to go back and retrofit what we would have liked to have been in there right from the start, but the regulations did not exist at that time.

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That brings me back to the subject at hand, which is the question of asbestos. Whether it is Dumas House or Hale House across the road, the government and all its contractors will be taking care to exhibit best practice when it comes to disturbing any asbestos materials that may be found there or may exist there, in the same way that members, not infrequently, bring to the attention of the house a concern that they might have about some renovations going on at a local school, for example. That highlights the fact mentioned by Hon Jon Ford that all sorts of different sources of asbestos are out there almost as a ticking time bomb. If a school or a school outbuilding has an asbestos roof, the question often arises as to what to do with the asbestos. A lot of the advice from the experts—I do not claim to be an expert—is to leave the asbestos in situ rather than disturb it because the risk of disturbing asbestos and breaking it up generates a far greater risk than just leaving it there if it is in a stable condition. I used the adjective “friable” earlier in relation to asbestos. If members are not familiar with the term, they will readily recognise what it means. It means that the asbestos is in a form in which it is breaking up, prone to give off fibres, crumbles or could be reduced to such a state just by the pressure of one’s hand being used to crush it. It is very crumbly, and we all know the nature of it. That then begs the question: if we leave the asbestos in situ because that is the best thing to do on all of the available advice and risk assessment now, what will the situation be in 10 or 20 years? That has to be part of the assessment as well. That is why I welcome Hon Jon Ford’s comment that there has to be a bipartisan or multipartisan approach to this. I think that is advisable. It is an intergovernmental and intergenerational question that we have to deal with as a community. I think it is best to get it out of the hothouse environment that sometimes exists in political debate so we can deal with the ongoing programs. I look forward to dealing with the honourable member in due course as we progress those matters.

Other members will want to make a contribution to this debate. I have not taken any time today to go through the things that the government is doing, including producing fact sheets to advise people about asbestos in the home, some changes that we have just made to the legislation and that sort of thing. The nature of the debate does not allow us to drill down into all of that detail anyway. I think we have achieved a lot by the question being raised and the way it has been raised. I thank the honourable member for raising the question. I honestly did not think I would be framing my remarks in this way when I was considering what the debate might be about today. I thank the honourable member for raising it; it has helped me to think about it. I have responsibilities, other ministers have responsibilities and future ministers will have responsibilities, and we have to be cognisant of the matters that the member raised. That brings me back to the point at which he started; that is, to recognise that asbestos is a historical problem and a problem for the future as well. In my concluding remarks, I join the honourable member in acknowledging the efforts of those who have worked so long and hard to champion and maintain the interests of those suffering from asbestos diseases, which are chronic, long lasting and, ultimately, in most cases, deadly. That brings us right back to the important human element of all this. It is always a timely reminder. I thank the honourable member for putting the question before us today. I support the sentiments that he has exhibited.

The PRESIDENT: Minister, in light of your comments, I look forward to a healthy appropriation for Parliament House to address these matters soon.

HON MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM (Agricultural) [10.54 am]: I also acknowledge the fact that in National Asbestos Disease Awareness Week Hon Jon Ford has seen fit to put forward a particularly important motion. I am sure that members of the house would agree that it is very timely and will generate much discussion. Despite this non-partisan spirit of conciliation approach, as a former educator I am concerned about one particular issue. I will state this upfront. The School Education Act Employees’ (Teachers and Administrators) General Agreement 2008 committed to some sort of collaboration on the gradual removal of asbestos in our schools or education precincts. That has not been acted on by the government since the agreement was signed and the government came to power. This is something that the government or the minister concerned needs to take on board. The government now seeks to remove that particular commitment and other occupational health and safety clauses from the agreement currently being negotiated. I find that disappointing, particularly given the comments that have been made thus far.

Hon Jon Ford discussed the capacity for all of us to ingest asbestos fibres. That is a particularly important issue to bear in mind. He mentioned the role of James Hardie and the various products manufactured by that company. He talked about the tradesmen and tradeswomen exposed to many of those products. Sadly, many of those people have passed away. He mentioned things such as brake linings and clutches in cars. My father passed away from lung cancer. Given the sort of occupations he had in his youth—he worked with a lot of asbestos, particularly when repairing motor vehicles in a rural environment—I am sure that that exposure had something to do with the problems he had in later life. Generally speaking, I commend both the members who have spoken thus far for their non-partisan conciliatory approach. It demonstrates our bona fides on this side of Parliament.

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Sadly, as we acknowledge this particularly important week, we acknowledge the hundreds, if not thousands, of Australians who have suffered due to mining, milling and “normal” use of this particularly deadly substance. There would not be too many of us who do not have friends, relations or acquaintances who have been affected by some sort of asbestos-related disease or the threat of that particular disease. The threat is something that sticks in the memories of a lot of people. A very close friend of mine is Hon Bob Thomas. He is one of those people. I spoke to Bob Thomas last night and said that we have this non-government business motion on the notice paper and would he mind if I mentioned his childhood in Wittenoom and his experiences; I was going to say the experiences that he enjoyed but, more appropriately, he does not enjoy thinking about them now. I know that Bob was on some sort of vitamin program for many years. He said to me that every day he has a cough or a chest complaint, he is particularly concerned about his health. He lives in fear of the fact that so many of the people that he grew up with and their parents have subsequently passed away from things such as asbestosis or mesothelioma. That is a concerning issue for Bob. I know that is the extreme example. I have never been anywhere near Wittenoom but I certainly have had exposure to asbestos-based products. There would not be too many of us who ever went to Wittenoom and who are in this situation. Most of us will know that front yards and the like were simply covered in asbestos material and kids basically played in the stuff. A family that lived next door to me when I was growing up in Perth expressed that very opinion to me on many occasions as we grew up. It is certainly an issue that sticks in the minds of everybody concerned who has had some sort of significant exposure.

I want to quote from Safe Work Australia’s first report into asbestos-related diseases entitled “Asbestos-related Disease Indicators”. The report states —

In this report, only mesothelioma and asbestosis have been used to indicate the extent of asbestos-caused disease in Australia. Asbestosis is caused exclusively by asbestos and asbestos is the only known cause of mesothelioma.

Those are a couple of very pertinent points, but I also point out that many other diseases or cancers are obviously associated with exposure to asbestos products. I will make particular mention of the report’s findings, which I need to put on record. The report states —

- In the past, exposure to asbestos fibres usually occurred while mining asbestos; manufacturing asbestos containing products; or using those products, primarily while constructing buildings.

I think that is pretty well known. The report continues —

- Currently, the main source of exposure to asbestos fibres are old buildings undergoing renovation or demolition where building maintenance and demolition workers are employed.

That is a most pertinent point at this stage of the debate.

The report also discusses deaths associated with mesothelioma and asbestosis. I do not have a lot of time left but suffice to say that I think I am right that the deaths associated with both those diseases are due to peak about the year 2025. Maybe Hon Jon Ford can give me some sort of indication about that. From my research, I think that is the case. Obviously, these issues will be with us for many, many years to come. Given that the onset of disease can be up to 40 years after exposure, the problems associated with asbestos-related diseases will be with us for some time.

That leads me to comment on prevention policy. The Safe Work Australia report states —

- The development of national model regulations for asbestos aim to harmonise jurisdictional regulations and provide, for the first time, a consistent framework for the minimisation of exposure; the removal of asbestos; and the management of remaining asbestos materials in workplaces.

Those points are perhaps a salient message to the government at this time. As far as I am concerned, the way forward for the Western Australian government obviously needs to be addressing that issue of the removal of asbestos from workplaces.

Given that I have only one minute remaining, I will draw my comments to a conclusion by saying that I am particularly concerned, as a former educator and someone who works in the Agricultural Region, about the exposure some of our kids have to asbestos-related products in our ageing schools. I note the Minister for Commerce’s remarks that it may well be appropriate to leave these sorts of products in place; however, sooner or later these asbestos-related products, whether they are roofs, sheds, linings in floors and walls or whatever else, will need to be removed. On that score, the government needs a more proactive plan in place to ensure that the threat of this apparent escalation we will see in the next 15 years is avoided at all cost.

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HON WENDY DUNCAN (Mining and Pastoral — Parliamentary Secretary) [11.04 am]: I thank Hon Jon Ford for raising with us that it is National Asbestos Disease Awareness Week. Asbestos-related diseases pervade all our circles of friends and relatives. It is something that, as alluded to in today's debate, will be with us for generations. In fact, I have a similar concern to Hon Jon Ford about whether I will be vulnerable to it at some stage, having been brought up in a station homestead that was both internally and externally clad with asbestos and subsequently going back there and very energetically getting involved in renovations in my early married life. There is potential for a range of people in the community to be affected by asbestos as the various phases of contact manifest themselves as the health effects of asbestos-related diseases.

The trouble, of course, is that—Hon Jon Ford alluded to this about his time in government when he was involved in trying to remedy the situation—particularly in Wittenoom, we cannot forcibly remove people from their homes. Even though they are acutely aware of the risks of remaining in a dangerous area, some people still decide to do so. I suppose the issue for us is that we are a free country, so at what point do we forcibly remove people from a health-risk area when they are fully aware of that risk? As Hon Jon Ford commented, this has vexed governments around Australia. It is something that the Minister for Regional Development in his capacity as Minister for Lands has been dealing with since we came to government. Hon Jon Ford also noted that the removal of asbestos from and the remediation of a place like Wittenoom is cost prohibitive. In particular, he noted that local governments are struggling to cope with the cost of remediating infrastructure in their jurisdictions, as is the state. Hon Matt Benson-Lidholm mentioned schools. Therefore, even though we may mandate the removal of this material, we cannot afford to ensure it happens. That, as Hon Jon Ford said, has vexed governments over time. We talk about removing people from their homes in high-risk areas; unfortunately, there is a quirk in the law that makes it very difficult to forcibly excise or resume those properties.

Hon Jon Ford's motion seeks detail on what plans and actions the Barnett government will implement to clean up and mitigate the effects of asbestos in Western Australia. The motion exhorts us to deal with this issue in a cross-jurisdictional and non-partisan way. Certainly, I think that this issue should be dealt with in that way; it is a very difficult issue that is pervasive throughout the community. The Department of Regional Development and Lands is the lead agency for the investigation and management of asbestos contamination in Wittenoom. The state has been pursuing a program of voluntary acquisition of all freehold land in the former town site and re-vesting that land into the state of Western Australia. That has not been completely achieved to date and, of course, until it is, it is quite difficult to commence remediation works. A lot of effort has been put into education and signage. However, as Hon Jon Ford mentioned, it is a spectacular part of the world and it is therefore very tempting for people who are travelling to go and see the place for themselves and put themselves at risk.

Hon Jon Ford: And some people remove the signs.

Hon WENDY DUNCAN: Yes, exactly. In fact, the Director General of the Department of Regional Development and Lands, when I was talking to him about this issue, said exactly that. He said the department had been putting up signs, only to have them removed or defaced, and that makes it very difficult to keep the message out there that Wittenoom is a very dangerous place.

In preparing for remediating the site and trying to remove the contamination, the Department of Regional Development and Lands has undertaken an ethnographic and archaeological study of the area. It did that in December 2010. It has also facilitated an interagency and industry technical workshop. That took place in April this year. The aim of these activities is to prioritise the sites for remediation and management and develop viable options to achieve that work. The Department of Regional Development and Lands is also preparing a feasibility and costing study of the potential options. Hon Jon Ford will be pleased to know that this is occurring in liaison with the Departments of Health, Environment and Conservation, and Mines and Petroleum, and LandCorp. This study will inform a cabinet submission requesting funding for the management and remediation of the asbestos contamination in Wittenoom.

I can assure the house that the Minister for Regional Development and Lands, and the department, in their responsibility for dealing with Wittenoom, are acutely aware of the dangers at Wittenoom and are endeavouring to have residents leave the town, and prevent other people from accessing the site, so that we can move on to the next phase of remediation.

I would like to conclude by saying that the people who have fought long and hard in this area, in particular the Asbestos Diseases Society of Western Australia, deserve our gratitude and our praise. They have done an incredible job, at times against all odds, and sometimes in the face of derision and having their cause discounted. But they have managed to convince society and the powers that be that this is a real and ongoing problem and that governments need to confront it and work on it. I thank them for that.

HON GIZ WATSON (North Metropolitan) [11.12 am]: I would like, on behalf of the Greens (WA), to also support the motion. I note also that this week is National Asbestos Disease Awareness Week.

Extract from *Hansard*

[COUNCIL — Thursday, 24 November 2011]
p9767b-9776a

Hon Jon Ford; Hon Simon O'Brien; President; Hon Matt Benson-Lidholm; Hon Wendy Duncan; Hon Giz Watson; Hon Helen Morton; Hon Adele Farina

As we know, asbestos is a very dangerous material. The appalling part of the asbestos story is that a lot of people knew about the dangers of asbestos long before they took any action to protect the workers who were mining the mineral. It is a shameful part of history, and it was a shameful action on the part of the various companies that were involved, that they have resisted providing adequate compensation to the families of those people who have lost their lives from an asbestos-related disease, and those who are continuing to suffer. It is a salutary warning to us about what lessons we can take from the history around asbestos.

I, like other members around this place, have had exposure to asbestos. I certainly had exposure to asbestos when I was working in the building industry. That included removing asbestos from properties, which is a very painstaking process if it is done according to the correct method, which involves wearing respiratory equipment and getting very hot in protective clothing.

I have to recount to members a little story about that. I had a job at a property in Fremantle to remove an asbestos roof that was weathering. It was a big asbestos roof, and asbestos sheeting is very heavy stuff to shift around. I made inquiries with the council about the requirements for disposal of asbestos, and I was given some very specific instructions about the need to line the trailer that I was using with double layers of heavy-duty plastic, and to tape everything down and keep everything wet. That was fine, and I did all of that. When I got to the tip and said to the guy at the gate, "I've got asbestos; where do you want me to put it?", he waved his arm to somewhere in the distance and said, "Over there". So I went over to where he had pointed, and I unloaded the stuff carefully onto the ground, thinking that it would be put carefully into some hole. As I was pulling the trailer away, along came one of those large machines that crunches everything up, and it rolled over the whole lot of asbestos sheeting, crunched it up and sent the dust flying all over the place. So I just thought, great; there is a bit of a flaw in this plan if people are going to put asbestos in exactly the same place as they are putting their domestic waste. Of course, in those days people were at the tip with their trailers, unloading garden waste and whatever, and all the asbestos dust went everywhere—but it did not matter! I found that rather disappointing after I had made the effort to retain the stuff.

Of course, asbestos is particularly challenging because it is the fibres that we cannot see that are the most dangerous. The nature of asbestos fibres is that they are needle-like and very fine, and they can, therefore, be inhaled relatively easily and can lodge in a person's lungs, and that can cause breathing problems and even death for those who contract asbestosis or other lung-related diseases.

I also want to add any acknowledgement to those who are working in this area to bring justice to the workers who have suffered from asbestos exposure. Those workers should not have suffered because, as I have said, the industry and certain health authorities knew very well about the risks of asbestos, and it took a very long time for action to be taken and warnings to be put in place.

A comment was made about asbestos that is still in situ in public buildings and homes. There is a level of awareness about asbestos, I think. However, there is the potential that that awareness could drop away and that future home renovators might not be so mindful of what is asbestos and what is not. Hon Jon Ford made the comment that the difference between fibre cement sheeting and asbestos cement sheeting is obvious to people who have worked with the two materials, but to an untrained eye it is not that obvious. Therefore, we cannot relax when it comes to maintaining the level of awareness about the dangers of asbestos. A comment was made also about asbestos roofing in schools, and about whether, if the asbestos is in situ and is sealed, it is best just to leave it where it is. A roof is a classic example of the problem that exists, because even though an asbestos roof may be well sealed, it is very difficult to seal the edge, which is where most of the weathering occurs, and that weathering may cause bits of asbestos to be deposited into the guttering and be spread elsewhere.

The final comment I want to make about asbestos and asbestos-related diseases is whether we have actually learnt about some of the very dangerous minerals that we dig up. I cannot help but make the comment that, in my view, what asbestos is today, uranium will be tomorrow. We know from the problem with asbestos at Wittenoom how difficult it is to try to remediate a site once we have disturbed the ore body and created pathways for it to be eroded and washed onto the plains. Exactly the same problem exists with trying to contain uranium. Uranium is a similarly dangerous and insidious product, because we cannot see its risks. We cannot see the damage that is caused by exposure to radon and other breakdown products from uranium ore. Therefore, we are embarking on a path in Western Australia where we will be mobilising this ore body, not into people's homes in the way that asbestos has been, and not for the multiple uses that asbestos has been put to in the community, which has created even more problems, but in a way that will, nevertheless, have the same health impacts. Those health impacts will not necessarily turn up immediately. They will turn up 10, 20 or 30 years down the track, and they will turn up in the same way, by affecting people's lungs and causing respiratory diseases. We know that that is a consequence of disturbing uranium ore bodies. We should learn some lessons from what has happened in Western Australia with the mining of asbestos and the consequences of disturbing those ore bodies. We will see exactly the same health outcomes if we go down the track of disturbing uranium ore bodies.

With those comments, I thank Hon Jon Ford for moving this motion and allowing us to acknowledge that this is National Asbestos Disease Awareness Week. We should also give our ongoing support to the people who continue to suffer from diseases caused by asbestos and to their families.

HON HELEN MORTON (East Metropolitan — Minister for Mental Health) [11.20 am]: I support the motion of Hon Jon Ford, and I will seek to provide some of the details and plans he has sought in the motion, particularly those being undertaken at the moment by the Department of Health in Western Australia. Prior to my briefing on this matter, I was unaware of the extent to which Perth is the hub for national health research work being done into asbestos-related diseases. I also have a personal experience with a very close family member, a young father of six, who died from an asbestos-related disease. I was around his family as he was managed at home before his death. Of course, I also had the benefit of being part of an inquiry, which was undertaken since I became a member of this place, following on from the Auditor General's work into how asbestos was being removed from schools, so I got an additional look at it from that point of view.

I will go into some of the points that the people from the Department of Health particularly wanted me to make. Asbestos exposure can lead to serious and often fatal diseases—everybody knows about that—including mesothelioma, asbestos lung cancer and asbestosis. Periods of between five, 10 and 40 years can pass before asbestos disease symptoms appear in patients. There is no safe level of asbestos fibre exposure. Around 2 500 people are diagnosed yearly in Australia with asbestos-related diseases. Australia has a high incidence of malignant mesothelioma per capita worldwide. Five hundred men and 100 women currently develop mesothelioma each year, and this is expected to rise to 900 new cases a year by 2020. Mesothelioma is a cancer of the pleura in lungs, and the average survival time after diagnosis is six to 18 months.

The production of asbestos-containing products ceased in Australia in 1987, and a national ban on asbestos came into effect in 2003. The Department of Health is currently in the process of reviewing the Health (Asbestos) Regulations 1992. Key areas of reform are to increase penalties, provide greater enforcement powers to authorised officers, prohibit re-uses of asbestos cement materials, and align the regulations with national occupational safety and other legislation. We are at the stage at which drafting instructions are being prepared to commence this process. The Department of Health has contributed to the development of a national e-health asbestos guide for householders and the general public, which is close to being finalised. This is being written as a risk communication guide and will provide nationally consistent messages on asbestos to the general public. The Department of Health has also been working with a Murdoch University focus group that has developed the Australian Asbestos Network website. The website has proved to be a valuable resource on asbestos and is accessible to the wider community. The Department of Health is currently working with the Cancer Council WA on developing an educational training program for do-it-yourself community members. The Department of Health has developed a number of publications and guidance materials on asbestos-related subjects to address emerging risk and areas of need. Examples can be found on the Department of Health website at www.public.health.wa.gov.au. Specific documents can be found under “Environmental health, water, food and hazards”. A guide for consumers was developed titled “Asbestos Issues: Who Do You Call?”, which provides a clear pathway on which agency of government to contact on particular matters relating to asbestos in the community.

The number of people affected by asbestos-related diseases is on the increase due to the long latency period from asbestos fibre exposure to disease manifestation. The widespread use of asbestos in industry, weathering and ageing of asbestos-containing materials, and renovation of buildings containing asbestos may continue to release asbestos fragments for many years. Research into asbestos-related diseases is conducted mainly at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital and the University of Western Australia and involves many leading clinicians, scientists and researchers. As I mentioned, Perth is the hub for the National Centre for Asbestos Related Diseases. The Western Australian government, through the Department of Health, has for several years funded an asbestos review program involving vitamin A and a preclinical trials program aimed at developing and trialling novel therapies for asbestos cancers. The Department of Health has convened a local network of regulators, local government representatives, researchers and community support groups to work in the area of asbestos and related diseases. This group is a first in Australia and is creating a great collegiate across the state. The Department of Health, in conjunction with the Department of Environment and Conservation, has developed and published a document titled “Guidelines for the Assessment, Remediation and Management of Asbestos-Contaminated Sites in Western Australia”. This document is currently being considered for national adoption. Most recently, the Department of Health has undertaken a survey of local government experience with asbestos problems associated with demolitions, removals and illegal dumping. The related report will help drive government actions on these problems.

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An extra bit of information that the department particularly wanted me to mention is that although there are many real, as well as perceived, risks associated with asbestos, asbestos in sound condition and undisturbed, such as asbestos roofs, walls, eaves and fences associated with many older buildings in WA, presents a negligible public health risk. I hope that my comments have provided some of the information that the member is looking for about the health aspect.

HON ADELE FARINA (South West) [11.27 am]: I would like to commend Hon Jon Ford for bringing this motion to our attention today, because not only is it National Asbestos Disease Awareness Week, but also it provides an opportunity to again raise awareness about this awful disease and gives us an opportunity to focus our attention on it. I also would like to congratulate the government for its response to this motion in trying to provide some information about the current plans in place.

The fact is that this is a very real issue that continues to dominate our landscape, with thousands and thousands of people being affected by it. So there is more that we need to do to address this issue and to assist those people who suffer from the diseases that result from asbestos fibres. As Hon Giz Watson said, one of the most damning things is that we knew about the impacts of asbestos in the mid-1970s. We knew that exposure would create crippling debilitation among workers who were employed in asbestos-related industries. However, it was not until mid-1985 that the companies that produced asbestos products started removing the asbestos from those products or no longer produced those products. In the meantime, thousands and thousands of people had been impacted by asbestos fibres. In many cases, children also have been impacted because often in those years the parents let their children help out in their private businesses or they took them to work. Therefore, we have a second generation that was also affected by it. Because of the number of people renovating older properties around the state, another group of people is being exposed to asbestos fibre. As was mentioned by a number of speakers, although there is a greater awareness of asbestos and its impact, what is less understood is how it can be identified and dealt with safely. One of the biggest problems is that not many people in the community can identify asbestos and also know how to deal with it safely. This is a real issue that I urge the government to keep on its radar. It must provide enough government support and funding to ensure that we remove asbestos from buildings throughout the state. I note Hon Wendy Duncan's comment that this is a very expensive process, but it is a critical one.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.