

HEALTH ACT AMENDMENT BILL (COUNCIL AMENDMENTS) 5 January 1922

Edith Cowan supported an amendment to the Health Act to require the reporting of venereal disease.

Mrs COWAN: I support the amendment. Those who have always asked for the signed statement are getting exactly what they want. At the same time we are not asking the public to make perjurers of themselves as previously. No one could say that he knew a thing which only a medical man could know, and had the Act not been altered the point would undoubtedly have been tested. This amendment provides ample protection. When dealing with such a cruel and devastating disease, we cannot do too much to protect the women and children. Opponents of the amendment apparently do not want any compulsion at all. We must put aside the idea that venereal disease is a crime, because it is often innocently contracted. Those who go amongst the people suffering from this disease should realise the necessity for doing our best to eradicate it. The member for North-East Fremantle, if he would, could speak of its effects as seen at the Hospital for the Insane.

Hon. W.C. Angwin: That is not so.

Mrs COWAN: The hon. member knows that it is so; the children there and the cases of G.P.I. prove it. The person informed against can go to his or her doctor. Surely it is in the interests of the race and of those pitiful cases which continually come under our notice that something should be done to prevent the disease. I cannot understand the inconsistency of some who object to this provision. Why do they not object to the boys and girls in the Children's Court being examined for infectious disease by the order of two justices.

Hon. W.C. Angwin: Their people have agreed to it.

Mrs COWAN: It has not been voluntary; such examinations have been made by order of the court.

Mr PICKERING: Not for a specific disease.

Mrs COWAN: Decidedly; and in the five years the court has had the power to order such examinations, no objection has been raised. Therefore, why object to the Commissioner having this power? Do members realise that we have 1,000 fresh cases of venereal disease every year.

Hon W.C. Angwin: Are you sure of it?

Mrs. COWAN: It has been said in this House that women have been more manly than men in the matter of informing on the opposite sex. This is not correct. I have made inquiries and find that women are womanly enough to wish to protect the race, and have informed on men. This provision cannot possibly operate harshly against women, it will engender confidence and help them to come for treatment. The whole community would be better if every member of it could be examined from time to time. The idea that disease is a "crime" should be got rid of. Whether the disease is acquired innocently, or as the result of what is a generally considered, and what I for my part consider, to be immoral conduct, the disease should be cured. I welcome Dr. Saw's amendment because it seems to me to meet the whole difficulty. To say that any policeman will have power to take action under the amendment any more than he could before seems to me nonsense. This measure will never be worked as a Police Act and it is not a police measure. Mention has been made in this connection of "the accused". But nobody is accused. A deal of nonsense has been talked on the question from time to time, because it has been looked at from an utterly wrong aspect. As far as possible, the Bill makes the position absolutely fair between men and women. I do not think it ever will be or can be used wrongfully against women. The position now is very different from what it was in the days of Josephine Butler. We must do something to reach those who refuse to be treated; we must reach them for the sake of the race, for the sake of the poor little suffering children one sees, and for the sake of the grown-ups whom one sees carrying a legacy of sorrow all their lives. Let us not go on beating the air and making this legislation ineffective. I represent a very great number of women on the National Council of Women, and we supported the original measure. We knew what we were talking about, and we know what we wanted. The medical women of Western Australia support the measure; I have not heard of one medical woman in this State who does not support it. Dr. Saw's amendment has my support because I feel that it is a safeguard against the possibility of any objectionable action being taken under the measure. The Red Cross Society of Geneva hold that legislation for the treatment of this disease is essential. The society advocate the same kind of law as we have here being ultimately needed. The British National Council for Venereal Diseases also support this same idea and America has gone in for it very strongly, and I understand with good effect.

Hon. W.C. Angwin: That is because they have all been fooled by the Western Australian law. Our Act has been trumpeted throughout the world as an ideal Act of Parliament. That is an absolute fact.

Mrs COWAN: I support the Bill because there is no registration of women possible under it, and because there is possible under it no periodical examination of women such as obtained in the days of the Contagious Diseases Acts which Mrs. Butler fought, and because there is no segregation of women possible under it. We should do all we can to make the measure a success, with a view to preventing the dreadful suffering and misery that some of use have seen. On one occasion there was brought before the Justices at the Children's Court a girl whose state was obviously so bad that we at once ordered her to the hospital for medical examination. A few days later she was brought to the court to give evidence. So dreadful was the girl's condition that the table on which she leaned and the chair on which she sat were ordered by the medical authorities to be disinfected before anybody else should sit there; and that disinfecting was done in the

court before the case went on. The girl was in a terrible, a hopeless condition; and yet she was only 16 years of age. I would not mind if under the measure a mistake were made in the case of even someone related to myself, so long as steps were taken to combat effectively this terrible disease and safeguard little children.