

8.2 Questions to Ministers Without Notice - The Minister for Health and Social Services

The Bailiff:

We now proceed with the second question period of the Minister for Health and Social Services and I invite questions.

8.2.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisier:

This will be debated later, but we have been told many times that the Minister for Planning is operating on evidence provided from the Health Ministry in regard to mobile phone masts, and yet last sitting, Sir, the Health Minister said he was inclined to support a six-month moratorium. Could he tell us what the nature of the advice is that his department has given to the Planning Minister and could he say how that squares with his support of a six-month moratorium?

Senator S. Syvret (The Minister for Health and Social Services):

The advice given by my department to the Planning Department is that it has come from examining reliable, robust science. In fact when one examines the availability of material on the internet and elsewhere, although a lot of it might appear convincing to a lay reader, in fact a lot of it really is rubbish. We have, in these kinds of questions, to be guided by the evidence - robust scientific evidence - and that is the evidence that will have been furnished by the Health Department to the Planning Department. My position as I said at the time, in fact, was not necessarily that I thought there would be health issues with the mobile phone mast but simply there were other concerns such as mast-sharing, and whether simply physically we needed 200 masts in a small island environment.

8.2.2 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisier:

Would the Minister not acknowledge - indeed I think it has been expressed by him over things like the Mohan report re. toxins at the airport - would he not acknowledge that science is in an evolving stage in this regard and while it may veer towards there being a conditionally safe approval from his department, where does he find the evidence to make such firm statements about the health-free risk of mobile phone masts?

Senator S. Syvret:

The evidence I rely upon in making those kind of claims is in fact on the robust science, and if you did a detailed examination of the published material in relevant scientific journals and elsewhere on university websites, there is a great mass of this kind of information available. All of the robust peer review scientific examinations have been unable to detect any health effects from mobile phone emissions. It is certainly true, as I have said previously, that the state of science does in fact evolve, but for the time being there is no evidence of these transmissions posing a particular risk.

8.2.3 Deputy S.C. Ferguson of St. Brelade:

But surely how does this attitude square with the comments in the Stewart Report that say: "In the light of the above considerations we recommend that a precautionary approach to the use of mobile phone technology be adopted until much more detailed and scientifically robust information on any health affect becomes available." Now, I also have been on the internet and there are a lot of studies going on at the moment but there are none that are concluded. I wonder if the Minister would like to comment.

Senator S. Syvret:

I think there are in fact an awful lot of studies that are concluded. There has been some really quite robust work done on the subject for at least 2 decades now, so there is a very substantial

body of evidence out there. The Stewart Report recommended a cautionary approach, although I think that statement that the Deputy just quoted needs to be read within the context more broadly of the report. I generally tend to favour a cautionary approach myself but again, as I have said previously, we have to weigh-up the risks, the costs and benefits of activity that we wish to engage in, in society as people, and the vast majority of the people - certainly the vast majority of Members in this Assembly - use mobile phones and we therefore need and rely upon the network to support that use. The fact is you are getting a greater exposure to the effects when you are using a mobile handset held to your head than you are from any mast.

8.2.4 Deputy J.B. Fox:

Perhaps I could ask the Minister - I know we are on a debate later today, but referring to P.144/2006 page 2 the Medical Officer of Health has stated: "The evidence and judgment of these bodies is that public exposure to lower levels of radio waves below the accepted international standards from mobile phones and base stations are not likely to damage human health." It is the words "not likely" as though there is an element of doubt attached to it. Perhaps he could comment for me on that statement by his own Medical Officer of Health, thank you.

Senator S. Syvret:

I think you will find that most scientists - most clinicians and most scientists in all fields - would use that kind of language and that kind of phraseology when describing effects or phenomena that they have studied. It is not necessarily always possible to be able to prove negatives. The science philosopher Karl Popper was the most famous authority on this and he spoke of determining scientific evidence and coming to scientific conclusions based on the theory of falsifiability. Simply trying to prove negative effect - trying to prove negatives - is not, in fact, regarded as good science.

8.2.5 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

May I ask the Minister for Health, in light of the impending - in all likelihood - strike and closure of the airport in Jersey, how will this affect emergency flights to and from the Island for the hospital services? How will it also affect the scheduled services and hospital visits that have been arranged by the Health Department? How are they going to mitigate against these closures?"

Senator S Syvret:

It is certainly my hope that industrial action will be avoided. I have to say, though, so far it has always been the case that whenever industrial action has been taken by the unions in Jersey they have always made a special case of health and social services, which I think we should all be very grateful for. Certainly in the past no industrial action has had an effect on health and social services, the hospital or the services we provide to the community. If industrial action does affect the airport, I would hope, and indeed be confident, that the Union would adopt a similar approach to opening the airport for emergency flights and things of that nature.

8.2.6 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

That settles me somewhat in relation to an emergency situation, but I did ask about the scheduled operations that people would be attending in the United Kingdom. What is going to happen to the people who have planned operational procedures or investigations? Will they be travelling by sea instead?

Senator S Syvret:

I can be less certain about that answer because we just do not know to what extent the industrial action will be and what kind of depth it might take. But certainly the questioner is correct. If scheduled flights are seriously disrupted, or even brought to a halt, that would affect the transfer

of our patients to many of the tertiary centres we use in the United Kingdom. Again, I suppose, I would have to have discussions with the Unions themselves to see if any kind of flexibility could be introduced into the situation. Certainly we would do all that we could to reschedule people's procedures or find alternative means of getting them to the United Kingdom, indeed possibly by sea. It is an evolving situation and we are aware of all of these issues and we are bearing them in mind.

8.2.7 Deputy A.E. Pryke of Trinity:

Could the Minister inform the House if he feels there is sufficient homeless provision - and where it is - for young people between the ages of 16 and 18, as most homes like Roseneath, *et cetera*, are now registered for 18 years plus.

Senator S Syvret:

No, there is not enough provision in this field. We certainly need to be investing more and we need to be doing an awful lot more for young people. These young people are often readily criticised by society in general, and indeed, politicians, as being potential troublemakers, but the children in this kind of category have often come from a very, very difficult background - dysfunctional families of one kind or another, alcohol or drug problems. I do think we, as a society, have a duty to do all that we can to support these young people. The straight answer to the Deputy's question is, frankly, no, we do not have enough money and we are not investing enough money in this field.

8.2.8 The Deputy of Trinity:

In the new registered scheme for this sheltered accommodation like Roseneath and Shelter, do you feel it is right in the terms of their licence that it does not allow someone who is homeless, but they have to fit the box of either having a mental disorder or be drug and alcohol dependent?

Senator S Syvret:

I think the difficulty that those institutions have is that there is such a substantial demand for their services that they do have to categorise and draw the line in these kinds of ways. There are also other issues - child protection issues, protection of vulnerable youngster issues - that would mean that certain age groups, for example, those of the age of 17 or 18 or 19, you would not want to be mixing with particularly younger groups of children. It is a very difficult field and certainly I think we would want to look very closely at what kind of investment we can make into this in the future, because these groups of people do need better protection than that which is available to them at the moment.

8.2.9 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Will the Minister give an update of the progress of the Sexual Health Strategy which is out for consultation and when it is intended to address some of the concerns raised by A.C.E.T. (AIDS Care Education and Training) and Brook in respect of sexually transmitted diseases among young people?

Senator S Syvret:

The Sexual Health Strategy is, I think, broadly published now. It has been produced in close co-operation with groups like A.C.E.T. and Brook, clinicians at the hospital and other stakeholders. It is very nearly at the stage where we will be able to implement it and roll it out, so we are very nearly there with the Sexual Health Strategy.

8.2.10 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

Sorry to return to phone lines. I assume that the Minister has had a report from his officials with reference to the work that has been done and the safety of these base stations and so on. I wonder if that report could be made available to the States' Members.

Senator S Syvret:

Certainly. I think this was a report produced a couple of months ago when this matter first arose and I understood it had been published. If it has not, I can certainly make arrangements for it to be distributed.

8.2.11 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

After the Minister had been a witness to the Overdale inquiry - where, I must say, he was a very useful and good witness - he immediately gave a media interview where he termed the inquiry useless. Would he acknowledge that he had not previously consulted with the Panel Chairman who could well have briefed him on all the multitudinous reasons which had led to the inquiry and that the inquiry, far from being a repository for people who were moaning or whose families were moaning about leaving Overdale, was dealing with some very, very sensitive, emotional, physical, maintenance, capital, long-range issues which were increasingly becoming evident as it progressed? Would he not say that that was a slightly intemperate and premature judgment?

Senator S Syvret:

My judgment on the report itself will have to await its publication, but the fact is I do think that the Panel were misguided to put so much time and effort into simply the Overdale issue. I am asking my department to calculate the cost of this exercise because it is very, very substantial. I think this is more broadly a criticism that could be made perhaps of some Scrutiny Panels in the first 12 months. The fact is the status of the buildings at Overdale and the particular issues surrounding Overdale is not really the issue itself. It was a symptom - a symptom - of the broader issue, which is the overall problems of how we deal with an ageing society in Jersey: provision for those who need residential care and elderly care, what kind of investment and stakes is made into that field into the past couple of decades and what we are planning to do into the next decade or 2. Frankly, to focus on one particular building and one particular set of circumstances, I simply felt really was rather missing the target, and there was a much more justifiable need for broader strategic appraisal of the whole issue.

8.2.12 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister reassure the House that should his budget come under corporate pressure due to spending, that he will robustly and vigorously defend his part of his own budget?

Senator S Syvret:

Yes, I certainly will do. This is not something that will come as a shock to my Ministerial colleagues. I have made my position on this plain. We are living within our budget; we have done every year I have been responsible for Health and Social Services, which is 7 years now. We have always delivered to our budgets and we have made do with what we have been given by the centre. We have co-operated fully, we have delivered all of the efficiency savings that were required of us and, in fact, we have delivered a number of substantial service improvements during that time. But I am certainly not now - those kinds of efforts having been made by the department - going to go back to them and say: "Well, because the States generally has messed-up its finances we are going to have to cut into the budget we have already allocated for you next year." So, yes, certainly I will be resisting any such attempt if it is made.

8.2.13 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

I had intended to ask a supplementary. The Minister says he has asked for an account of the cost of seeking the information, but as he well knows, and as he has argued many times in this House,

it is, of course, absolutely open to a Panel to ask that which they want in order to further their inquiries. He should also know - and it may not be his fault, it is a symptom, sadly, of how bad the system is - there were very simple questions asked about maintenance schedules, for example, which took weeks and weeks and which arrived after the Panel had finished its formal hearings.

The Bailiff:

Come to the question, please.

Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

My question is, does he not acknowledge that a Scrutiny Panel has an absolute right to ask for the information that it wants? Secondly, it behoves a Minister to look at his internal processes and procedures before he starts criticising a Panel for incurring vast sums of money in its inquiry.

Senator S Syvret:

I am perfectly happy to look at my department's procedures. Any areas for improvement that we can alight upon are gratefully seized and taken up. Certainly, I am very happy to do that. As far as accepting that Scrutiny Panels have the absolute right to look at what they please when they please and ask for all of the relevant information, yes, absolutely. I do accept that and that has always been the case. As the Deputy well knows, I have always been a strong supporter of Scrutiny. As I have said previously, I was the only Minister to vote in favour of the establishment of the Scrutiny Panel, which we have just appointed a Chairman to today. But just as the Scrutiny Panels have a right to their own views, comments and opinions, I think I and anyone else also has a right to express their opinions and views too. If we are going to work together in a co-operative process I do not think we can go into this new era of government imagining somehow that the work of the Scrutiny Panels themselves are somehow immune from scrutiny or criticism or challenge.

The Bailiff:

That concludes the second question period