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MO: H/07/07579

Mr Neil Laurie
The Clerk of the Parliament
Parliament House
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Dear Mr Laurie

Thank you for your letter to the Honourable Stephen Robertson MP, Minister for Health, dated 11 October 2007, enclosing Petition Numbers 850-07 and 910-07, regarding the Needle and Syringe Program, operated by the Queensland Injectors' Health Network at Burleigh Heads. The Minister has asked me to respond on his behalf.

The siting of these programs depends on a range of factors, including consideration of community demand and need for such programs, the availability of sterile injecting equipment in the community, proximity to other health services, the presence of safe disposal facilities, access by public transport, and distance from residences and businesses. There is considerable demand for sterile injecting equipment within the general location of the needle and syringe program at Queensland Injectors' Health Network and the wider Gold Coast area in general. While such demand exists, the Queensland Government would be remiss not to facilitate access to sterile injecting equipment through programs such as those at Burleigh Heads, to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. This strategy is evidenced to be extremely effective in reducing the transmission of HIV and Hepatitis B and C to the community at large, and relies heavily on the ready access and availability of sterile injecting equipment in order to prevent sharing. In countries that have not provided ready access to sterile injecting equipment, uncontrolled epidemics of infectious disease have occurred. A study by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing has determined that Australia's needle and syringe programs have prevented 25,000 cases of HIV infection and 21,000 cases of Hepatitis C infection up to the year 2000, a health care saving of \$7.8 billion. As the social and financial costs associated with the treatment of these diseases are significant, prevention of these diseases is desirable.

I would prefer that such programs were not necessary, however the issues of illicit drug use are not simply resolved.

Programs, such as Queensland Injectors' Health Network at Burleigh Heads, are frequently operated by non-government organisations. Local Government Authorities have responsibility for town planning, including consideration of the siting of such services and ensuring that businesses comply with local zoning regulations. Complaints about the siting of Queensland Injectors' Health Network should more properly be made to the Gold Coast City Council.

I appreciate the inclination of the petitioners to become involved in the issues surrounding drug use in the community. It is through the interest and activities of a range of committed personnel, both from Queensland Health and the community, that we maintain the lowest rates of HIV / AIDS and Hepatitis C among injecting drug users in the world.

In closing, the overall aim of providing sterile injecting equipment is to prevent the spread of infectious diseases to the broader community. The importance of maintaining this program is recognised by the Prime Minister who has increased funding to enable expansion of these programs through the Council of Australian Governments' Illicit Drugs Diversion Initiatives. In maintaining the Queensland Needle and Syringe Program, the Queensland Government does not encourage or condone illicit drug using behaviour. We would obviously prefer that these programs were not necessary but in our modern world they are unfortunately a fact of life.

Should you have any queries regarding my advice to you, Mr Robert Kemp, Manager, Queensland Needle and Syringe Program, will be pleased to assist you and can be contacted on telephone 3896 3848.

Yours sincerely

KAREN STRUTHERS MP
Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health