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PROOF

MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Child Abuse

SPEECH

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Speaker Kroger, Sen Helen

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Senator KROGER (Victoria) (1.41 pm)—Today I would like to take the opportunity to talk about one of society's few remaining taboos: child abuse and how adult survivors still suffer from their traumatic childhood experiences and how little support they receive on their difficult road to recovery.

You might have seen an unusual TV commercial recently which caught your attention. In this commercial, you see a very proud father of a very pretty bride who is giving his wedding speech in honour of the newlywed couple. As you would expect, the mood is relaxed and all of the guests are having a good time. You can hear their constant laughter in the background whilst the father of the bride is cracking one joke after the other—but the biggest so-called joke of all is yet to come. The young, beautiful bride is smiling radiantly at her father and he says, 'Forgive an old bloke for getting a little sentimental, but as I look at Melissa today I remember the first words I ever said to her after sex, "Don't tell mum".' Whilst the bride, the mother and all the guests burst out in embarrassed giggles, a voice comes on saying, 'If only it was this easy to get over child abuse. For more than two million Australians it isn't.'

This commercial is intended to be shocking and it is. It is intended that viewers feel uncomfortable and they do. This commercial hits the very nerve of an uncomfortable problem which is still widely ignored in Australia today: the long-term effects of child abuse. Little attention is paid to the fact that the impact of abuse does not stop when the abuse stops, nor does the impact stop overnight when the victim turns 18. The issue of child abuse hits some very raw social nerves. Children who are abused live in fear of disclosing, while adults are expected to shut up and get over it. But child abuse is not something you simply get over. This is the central message of this TV commercial, which was launched as one part of a confrontational advertisement campaign by the not-for-profit organisation ASCA, Adults Surviving Child Abuse.

I have met and supported ASCA during their campaign launch here in Parliament House and have been very impressed with their work. Their credo, not only in this advertising campaign but also in their everyday work, is that they cannot give victims back their childhood but it can give them a future—a future

free from the nightmares which have haunted survivors for years and, in some cases, decades. ASCA's national advertising campaign is the first crucial step in a community awareness program designed to create the change needed for survivors to be able to come forward and receive the help that they need. ASCA is a national, Australian, non-government organisation founded in 1995. Since then, the organisation and its many volunteers have been fighting for the needs of adult survivors of all forms of child abuse and neglect, whatever shape that may take. Conservative estimates suggest that there are more than two million adults surviving child abuse in Australia. Other sources believe the real number is much higher, as reported abuse cases usually are only the tip of the iceberg.

Although it is a huge problem, with great impact on many lives, there is little community or government support for adult survivors. ASCA is pushing to overcome this lack of support. In the past decade it has been raising awareness about the legacy of childhood trauma. Through its Australia-wide network of survivors, supporters and professionals, ASCA has been helping to break down the sense of isolation and alienation that many survivors feel. The charity would not exist today without the commitment and dedication of countless volunteers. And I think it is poignant that we recognise the contribution of those volunteers this week. On behalf of PACAN, Parliamentarians Against Child Abuse and Neglect, I would like to thank them for their highly appreciated and valued work.

Despite the lack of federal government funding in the past, ASCA has been providing advice, counselling and support to adult survivors. The charity continues to promote community based programs such as psycho-educational workshops and therapeutic groups for survivors. It is also managing the 1300 telephone information line, which currently operates from 9 am until 10 pm, seven days a week. As the charity is highly reliant on volunteers, it currently seeks further help to fully resource this 1300 line. Another important aspect of its work is educating, informing and training healthcare professionals, who often have little knowledge and little understanding about the special needs of their patients. In Australia, sadly, the numbers of child abuse are on the rise—33,000 children are known to have been abused and neglected only last year. Research suggests that one in four girls and one in seven boys is sexually abused by the time

they are 18, and 30,000 Australian children live in out-of-home care for their own protection. This figure is also on the rise. In South Australia, for instance, one in four children is now the subject of a child protection notification by the age of 16. One in four! It is just extraordinary.

Clearly we need new concepts and ideas on how to stop this phenomenon. The prevention of child abuse must be given a top priority in all of our efforts. But, at the same time, we must not forget about the people who have already gone through this living hell. We must not forget about people who have been traumatised so deeply it takes them years to speak out loud about the injustice they had to endure during their childhood and adolescence—if they ever find the strength to confront the demons at all. Statistics, research and individual cases suggest that adult survivors do not simply get over their abuse. In fact, it is clear that the opposite is the case. How difficult it is for adult survivors to cope with their personal history is actually reflected in the healthcare statistics. Adult survivors are 2½ times more likely to suffer from mental health problems. They are four times more likely to be unhappy in later life. Adult survivors have an increased risk of having three or four medical diseases. They are more likely to be smokers and binge drinkers, more likely to abuse other drugs and more likely to be physically inactive. They are more likely to have attempted to commit suicide and, in general, to live with increased risk of an early death.

A recent study of Australian men conducted by the University of Bath has found that sexual abuse in childhood increases the risk of suicide in men by up to 10 times. Unfortunately, these healthcare statistics present in real life. According to ASCA, 65 per cent of male and female prisoners have been sexually or physically abused, and 70 to 80 per cent of homeless youth have suffered similar experiences. Whether it is through substance abuse, eating disorders, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, childhood abuse is causing significant and ongoing costs for society. In November 2008, Access Economics published a report estimating the financial impact of physical, sexual and psychological abuse. This report counts the cost of child abuse on the health, education and welfare systems, including the salaries of doctors, probation officers, teachers, police, foster carers and social workers, who all deal with abused children. Access Economics, in cooperation with Monash University Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia, came up with two alarming figures. Taking a very conservative figure of approximately 170,000 abused children per year as a basis, the financial impact tallies up to almost

\$7 billion every year. That is the actual financial impact of this.

Considering the more realistic figure of 500,000 abuse cases every year, ‘the best estimate of the actual cost of child abuse incurred by the Australian community in 2007 was \$10.7 billion, including the monetary value of the pain and suffering that children experience as a result of being abused and/or neglected,’ the report says. What makes this report unique is the fact that it not only recognises direct costs associated with child abuse, such as costs for social workers, police, doctors, nurses, foster families and psychologists, but also highlights that abused and neglected children can suffer from depression, anxiety and the ongoing effects of trauma. They may struggle to learn at school and may feel isolated as they may be unable to maintain what we consider to be normal relationships with their family and friends.

The damage of child abuse and neglect goes well beyond the physical manifestations of bruises and tears. Certainly what we need is a greater awareness in the healthcare and criminal justice systems to help identify those who are at risk and to offer them treatment before it is too late. ASCA is fighting for this very aim, and it is hard to image how many people would suffer even more if it was not for their continuous commitment and extraordinary dedication.

It can be incredibly hard for adult survivors to break their silence. Some of them have kept their secrets for decades, making it incredibly hard to find a way out their isolation. Many survivors have told themselves over the years, ‘That’s happened in the past, get on with it,’ only to realise years later that it is not that easy to cope with in the long term. Have a look, for example, at a recent abuse charge in New South Wales. A Catholic priest is accused of having sexually abused 31 young boys between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s. This case shows that the crime of decades ago is anything but forgotten in the everyday lives of the victims. This case shows how long it can take until survivors face their offenders and hold them accountable—if they can do it at all.

Guilt and self-blame are highly damaging. They stay with both male and female victims throughout their lives. Many suffer feelings of failure and isolation and think that it is a sign of weakness to discuss their past abuse with others. This is particularly difficult for male survivors. Coming to terms with their traumatic experiences is not easy for both sexes. But for men the stigma is even worse as many boys’ bodies respond to the touching they endure. Offenders are aware of this, convincing their victims that they ‘wanted it’ because they must be homosexual. As a consequence, many male victims blame themselves for their own abuse and remain silent—drowning their pain in drugs

and alcohol rather than realising that no child is ever responsible for the violence directed against them.

Adult survivors need special treatment, which Australia does not provide thoroughly and systematically today. State and federal governments need to develop and deliver programs which are designed for the specific needs of survivors. These programs must be available all over Australia, including rural and regional areas. Counselling and therapy must be affordable and, more importantly, easy to access. We also need to focus on the training of healthcare professionals. We need to increase the capacity and skills of the mental health workforce to offer effective and timely help to adult survivors. It is time to lift the needs of adult survivors higher on the national agenda. It is an absolute priority for all of us.

Sitting suspended from 1.57 pm to 2 pm