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Why is Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse Not Preventing Further Abuse?

The harrowing stories of repeated child abuse coming out of Mutitjulu, as detailed in last night’s ABC Lateline program, must be a wake up call for the Minister for Family and Community Services and her department, according to Shadow Minister Dr Richard Lim.

“I have repeatedly asked the Minister to ensure that all cases of reported child harm be thoroughly investigated by her department, but instead have been criticised by her for raising my concerns.” Dr Lim said.

“It is clear that the legislative requirement of mandatory reporting of child harm to NT Government authorities is not working.

“When children as young as 4 years are being treated for sexually transmitted infections, there has to be an assumption of sexual abuse and must be investigated.

“The Chief Minister said so in her comment ‘On the surface of it, if a seven-year-old has sexually transmitted infections, we should be taking action straight away’ (Hansard 14/06/2006).’ She also articulated her complete confidence in the reporting system.

“The Minister for Family and Community Services, on the other hand, does not share the Chief Minister’s confidence in the system as she has ordered an investigation into her department saying ‘what I have done is to ask my CEO to undertake an investigation within the agency to see where there are any failures in the system in notifications’ (Hansard 14/06/2006).’

Clearly, there are different positions in cabinet on this issue. It is probably for this reason that the Minister for Family and Community Services has not been able to secure any real increase in her budget to investigate these matters.

“The money in the health budget has gone to treatment rather than prevention. Surely, the principle of prevention is what you would expect in these circumstances. Ms Lawrie must do more to protect the children from such levels of abuse and seek appropriate levels of funding from her Cabinet colleagues for a department that she has identified as deficient.” Dr Lim said.

Since 2001-02, there has been a 36% increase in child abuse notifications in the Territory, and this includes a 96% increase in notifications in cases involving Aboriginal children, and all the Minister could assure is that she will investigate around 50% of all notifications of child harm.

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