

PHARMACY ROBBERIES

6 February 2007

The Hon. D.G.E. HOOD: I seek leave to make a brief explanation before asking the Minister for Police a question about the recent spate of pharmacy robberies.

Leave granted.

The Hon. D.G.E. HOOD: Since last December, there have been some 26 reported pharmacy robberies, with thieves targeting methamphetamine, the precursor drug to pseudoephedrine found in many cold and flu tablets. I am aware that this upsurge in pharmacy robberies has been attributed to the scarcity of pseudoephedrine that arose after some excellent work by police, who intercepted a major shipment of the substance coming in from Malaysia last year. My questions are:

1. Will the minister confirm that the recent increase in pharmacy robberies is a direct result of the high demand for pseudoephedrine in South Australia, in particular?
2. How many arrests have been made in relation to the pharmacy robberies thus far?
3. What proportion of the stolen pseudoephedrine was used directly in methamphetamine production?
4. What strategies has the state government put in place to reduce the number of pharmacy break-ins and illegal access to pseudoephedrine used in the manufacture of methamphetamines?

The Hon. P. HOLLOWAY (Minister for Police): The answer to the first question is 'probably'. Of course, what has happened in relation to

methamphetamines and illegal drug laboratories around the place is that, as a result of an increased policing effort in that regard, it almost certainly has led to people (or cooks as they are called) who seek to produce this drug looking for other resources.

Of course, there has been a significant change in the practices of pharmacies. Instead of using pseudoephedrine to make cold tablets—particularly tablets such as Sudafed, which are being sought by these drug cooks—as I understand it, the formula has been changed. Instead of using pseudoephedrine, there is some other product which has been used which has similar benefits for people who need those sort of tablets but which does not provide a precursor chemical for the production of methamphetamines.

It is my understanding that, even with some of the pharmacy break-ins that have occurred recently, in fact, their haul in relation to obtaining precursor chemicals to make methamphetamines has, in many cases, failed because the holding of those tablets that contain the required precursor product has been significantly reduced. A number of initiatives have been adopted on a national basis to try to curb access to these products and in relation to the drug companies that make these tablets. They have been approached to change the formula of those tablets so they cannot be used to provide the precursor chemicals.

Also, a scheme was developed in Queensland involving the Pharmacy Guild in that state. I think it was called Project Stop, if my memory serves me correctly. It is a scheme whereby records are taken of anybody who seeks to purchase these tablets and they are required to provide identification. That information is put into an online computer so that, if they seek to go to other shops to accumulate these sorts of tablets, that information is coded. Of course, the pharmacists concerned can take action to either refuse the sale or report the matter to police.

As I said, because of these sorts of activities, it has resulted in some desperation in relation to raids on pharmacies. In relation to the number of

arrests, I will have to take that question on notice but, clearly, there has been some success in relation to this matter. It is important that the police work with the pharmacy associations in terms of dealing with this problem. The message needs to get out that the people who steal these tablets are not necessarily getting what they want, and the drugs they might be producing are not likely to be methamphetamine if they are using the wrong sort of ingredients.

I think we need to adopt a number of approaches in relation to dealing with this problem. I note the honourable member himself has suggested (at least in the press) some legislative response to that. The government would be happy to look at that or any other initiatives in relation to curbing this epidemic which appears to be growing at the moment. But, as I say, it is my understanding that most pharmacies in this state and throughout the country are taking action to ensure that the thefts do not produce the result that methamphetamine cooks want—that is, gaining a source of precursor chemicals.

I should also add that, of the many initiatives that have been looked at in relation to curbing this issue, we have set up, following the police ministers' conference last year, a national database in relation to information on the so-called drug cooks—the people who commit these sorts of crimes—and also information in relation to intelligence about trends and so on with respect to the illicit production of methamphetamines.

I am sure, as a result of that national database and exchange of information, police will be more effective in dealing with this issue. So, it goes beyond the pharmacy area, but undoubtedly at the present time I think there is little doubt that the attacks on pharmacies are based on the assumption that these people who want to produce illegal drugs, namely methamphetamine, have access to the chemicals.