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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

ADJOURNMENT

Baby Safe Havens

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Polley, Sen Helen

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Senator POLLEY (Tasmania) (7.31 pm)—On Friday 5 March 2010 employees of a water treatment plant in the Brisbane suburb of Pinkenba made the kind of discovery that will no doubt be ingrained in their memories for the rest of their lives. The body of a newborn baby girl was discovered among the debris and waste of the water treatment plant like a discarded problem that had been washed away. But this was not a problem to be flushed from view and from mind. This had been an actual baby girl, with an infinite lifetime of possibilities ahead of her, before her short life came to a dramatic and deeply saddening end.

It is unknown how she came to be washed into the treatment plant. She could have been stillborn unexpectedly, her frightened mother not knowing what to do and choosing to dispose of the body. She could have been a late-term illegal abortion, disposed of by the easiest means. No-one knows, because no-one knows exactly who this little girl was or how she came to be at that water treatment plant. But one thing is for certain: a water treatment plant is hardly a fitting resting place for an innocent baby born without any wrongdoing in her heart and no sins committed.

Immediately, concerns for the health and wellbeing of the mother were expressed by authorities. This is to be expected, as a newborn disposed of in this way is hardly likely to have come from a confident mother who was seeking appropriate medical attention. Childbirth at the best of times is a major ordeal requiring the strictest of monitoring. But, under the circumstances in which this baby must have been born, there is no doubt that the mother would have required some level of medical treatment. Alas, to date the baby and her mother have not been identified.

So how is this baby to be buried? How is she to be remembered? As the discarded debris and waste she was found amongst? As a Jane Doe with no identity to mark her short life? As a tragedy that no-one saw coming? As a mystery? This is how that little girl should be remembered: as a lesson to all of us. She symbolises what could have been. If her mother gave birth to a live baby amidst confusion, fear and issues that affected her decision-making and capacity to mother her child, she may well have seen abandonment as her only option. If a network of baby safe havens had been created across the nation in appropriate locations such as police stations and hospitals, an alternative

would have existed. If these safe havens had been available, this mother may have delivered the baby to one of these havens rather than choosing to abandon her in a way that ultimately may have cost this newborn her life.

If this baby had been handed over under the protection of a baby safe haven, that baby could have been given a new lease on life, with adoptive parents to love and raise her. She would have grown from a baby to a little girl, playing with her Dora the Explorer dolls and driving her adoptive mother crazy by asking her 'why' at every given moment. She would have grown from a little girl to be a big girl, tying her own shoelaces and riding a bike without training wheels. She would have grown from a big girl to an adolescent, finding an identity for herself amongst her peers. Then she would have moved from adolescence to adulthood, having created a unique identity and establishing herself in this world. She would have chosen a profession, found a soul mate, married, had children and then delivered them the same sense of security and belonging she would have been given by her new parents. It is a complete picture of a life that might have been and it is a beautiful picture.

But she will sadly never be a part of that picture. Instead she will be the horrific image that those water plant employees see every time they close their eyes for years to come. The horror of such a discovery is real and understandable. The horror of knowing that we continue to fail to do what we can to avoid this sort of tragedy occurring is anything but understandable. No sense can be made of a lack of proper and appropriate response to these cases of abandoned babies and abandoned bodies. Each time I hear or read of a new abandonment my heart aches with the knowledge that this baby may have been saved.

Perhaps some of these abandoned babies are stillborn and perhaps some would be abandoned in unsafe locations regardless of the availability of safe and legal alternatives. But the one undeniable truth is that someone, somewhere along the line, will choose to use a baby safe haven and that decision will result in the survival of that child. It only takes one baby to survive abandonment to make the effort worth it because there is no cost-benefit analysis that can be applied to a human life. There is no rationale that dictates X number of babies need to be saved to justify

the establishment of baby safe havens because the number is not important. What is important is giving people choice: the choice not to abandon babies in cardboard boxes and doorways, the choice to use safe and legal havens that can offer protection and medical aid to the child and assistance and support to the parent.

This is an idea that I have continued to advocate for over 18 months. Over that period I have spoken in this chamber a number of times on this issue. I have collected hundreds of signatures on petitions calling for a nationwide network of safe havens and presented them in this chamber. I have written to all state Attorneys-General in a hope to gain state-by-state consistency and support in order to get the wheels turning. And I have continued to talk to anyone who expresses interest in supporting this proposal in order to give momentum to this cause. All of this, but the response from those who have the capacity to bring this idea to life is to cling steadfastly to the old way of responding to this issue. State Attorneys-General, whilst some expressed support for the idea, were universal in their decision not to push forward with coordinating a consistent approach for baby safe havens. Most held to the belief that current processes deal adequately with baby abandonment. But each and every abandonment proves that the current systems do not work. Anytime a mother chooses abandonment in a rubbish tip it proves that the current alternatives were not enough. Each time a baby's body is found in a park it proves that a better way must be found. Offering a mother a safe place to relinquish a child without fear of prosecution or judgment may not save every child but it will save some.

Let me make this one most important point: when it comes to protecting our children, no number of choices or alternatives is too many. There should be no length that we will not go to in order to protect newborns. They are our progeny, our legacy and our future. Our current systems are failing some of them, therefore we must step up and act.

I could spend forever talking about the details of my proposal for a network of baby safe havens. I could espouse the benefits and talk optimistically about all we could achieve, but tonight I will instead reflect on the fact that these abandoned babies are and were real people with a lifetime of possibilities ahead of them. Let us recapture the details of those babies who have been abandoned since I first spoke of the need for baby safe havens and how their lives turned out, or did not turn out. In January 2009, an eight-week-old baby abandoned by his mother on New Year's Eve was reunited successfully with his family two days later. In April 2009, a baby was abandoned on a doorstep in Dubbo. She was found alive and after five months of public campaigning to locate her mother

baby 'Sunday' was placed in permanent adoptive care. She is doing extremely well. In April 2009, the body of a tiny baby boy was found at a rubbish dump having been wrapped in a blanket and placed in a bin. He was named Nicholas by authorities, after the patron saint for children, and buried shortly after. In June 2009, a teenage girl was questioned after the body of a newborn baby was found by school students on the grounds of a South Australian high school. The life of a teenager was altered forever and the life of the newborn was reduced to nothing. And, finally, the body of a baby abandoned in a shopping bag at a bus stop in Shepparton in July 2008 still lies in the morgue, awaiting clearance from the coroner's office to be released and finally laid to rest. As you can see, some of these cases have a happy ending. Some do not. Ask yourselves with all honesty if the stories might have been different had those mothers known about, and had access to, a network of baby safe havens. (*Time expired*)