

# TRANSCRIPT

## ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the CFA training college at Fiskville

Melbourne — 18 May 2015

#### Members

Ms Bronwyn Halfpenny — Chair

Mr Tim McCurdy — Deputy Chair

Mr Brad Battin

Mr Simon Ramsay

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Vicki Ward

Mr Daniel Young

#### Staff

Executive officer: Dr Greg Gardiner

Research officer: Dr Kelly Butler

#### Witness

Mr David Card.

**Necessary corrections to be notified to  
executive officer of committee**

**The CHAIR** — Thank you so much for coming today to give evidence to the committee. Do you mind if we call you ‘David’ or would you prefer ‘Mr Card’?

**Mr CARD** — Dave is what people call me.

**The CHAIR** — I will go through a preliminaries and then we will talk to you. All evidence at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 and is protected from judicial review. Any comments made outside the precincts of the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript. If you would like to talk to us for a little while, and then following your presentation committee members would like to ask you questions if that is okay with you.

**Mr CARD** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — Would you like to start?

**Mr CARD** — Yes. Firstly, I would like to thank the committee for taking the time to read my submission and inviting me to attend today and contribute. I would also like to thank the Andrews government for initiating the inquiry into Fiskville. The decision to hold an inquiry demonstrates a genuine concern for the many people who have trained, taught, learnt, lived, worked and grown up at Fiskville. The Napthine government dodged the issue and brushed it under the carpet. They ought to be ashamed. I would also like to thank my friends and family who have come along to support me today, in particular my sisters, one of whom was at Fiskville with me, and also my great mate, Dan, who is a proud member of the MFB and has spent time at Fiskville.

I recognise that there have been many hundreds of submissions made to the inquiry so I would like to recap my submission. I was a pupil at Fiskville primary in 1991. Ten years later I discovered a lump on my testicle and within days that testicle was removed. I then underwent radiation treatment on the lymph nodes in my abdomen. In 2004 I had the remaining testicle removed following a second diagnosis of cancer, and a dose of chemotherapy on Christmas eve.

There were nine kids at Fiskville primary the year I was there. Our school badge had a tree, a sheep, a radio communications tower and a fireman’s helmet. We were proud of who we were and where we came from. The year after the school was sadly closed by the Kennett government a reunion was held and over 400 people turned up. It does not sound like a lot, but only 295 pupils had ever been enrolled. People from Fiskville were proud. This sense of pride did not really sink in to me as an 11-year-old boy, but in the following years it grew. Little did I know what lay ahead, and perhaps the closure of the school was a blessing in disguise.

Statistically testicular cancer affects 6½ men in every 100 000, so imagine the MCG full of only men and 6½ of those had testicular cancer. I guess I count for 2 of those 6½. I wonder what a statistician would make of those odds. My guess is they would have a field day. Testicular cancer did happen to me, and I have suffered and that cannot be changed. It has happened to others too. Perhaps it need not have happened. Perhaps I would not be paying for a daily dose of testosterone, which at only \$1.25 a day does not sound like much, but it quickly adds up. I estimate that I have spent around \$5000 on testosterone. I live a healthy lifestyle and I think I can reasonably expect to live for another 50 years, by which time I will have spent tens of thousands of dollars on testosterone alone.

Perhaps I would not have to pay for expensive IVF procedures to have children. I come from a large family and would love to have one of my own. However, at around \$10 000 a cycle of IVF it is beyond my means. Perhaps I would not have had to spend over \$2000 for the storage of my sperm since 2001. Perhaps I would not have to worry about my long-term health. Dozens of X-rays, weeks of radiation treatment and chemotherapy is not my idea of a good health history. Perhaps I would have finished my degree three years earlier. Perhaps I would not be here talking to you today. But I am here because something is not adding up about the number of people that have been afflicted with the Fiskville flu.

I do not know many people from my time at Fiskville, but I do know of several families that have spent time there and have been affected by testicular, brain and stomach cancers. Reading through the hundreds of submissions made to this inquiry is hard work and something is not adding up. So many people affected by their time at Fiskville is very hard to ignore. The CFA seemingly did this for an inexcusably long time.

My potential exposure to carcinogenic materials may not have been as high as that of the training firefighters, but I was a child. I turned 11 at Fiskville and I was heading into puberty, and I was there every day. I drank the water, breathed the air, stood on the side of the training area, waded through the water on the golf course and I wonder, ‘Is the exposure to a carcinogen on a child’s developing body more serious than in adults?’. Again, another field day, this time from a medical researcher.

This inquiry, however, is not about me. It is about the CFA. Like the kids and families who have passed through Fiskville primary, the CFA has a proud history, and I think just sitting here listening to the Ethertons and some of your comments that it is evident that this is coming through from a lot of people. They are proud of it. It is important to me that an organisation such as the CFA, dedicated to training people who take on the challenging vocation of saving lives and preventing disasters, should be equally dedicated to the health and wellbeing of the people they train and support. I ask: has the CFA management been neglectful in this regard? If the inquiry discovers that there are people who have suffered from a neglect of duty of care of the organisation, then they should be fairly compensated for death or injury consistent with the obligations of employers everywhere, but without having to undergo costly, adversarial, time-consuming and cruel court proceedings.

It has been difficult for the locals to see the closure of Fiskville. If the site is decontaminated and restored as a facility — fantastic. However, if the facility is closed permanently, I believe it would be appropriate for the government to develop a new training facility in the area or region.

Today is a big day for me and for the many people who have made submissions to the inquiry. I have felt a range of emotions, but, oddly, I feel lucky — and the Ethertons felt that as well — to be here to contribute. I offer my sympathy to those families who have lost loved ones, but hopefully now they can also find some answers and peace — in particular, Brian Potter, and his bravery in going public with his knowledge of the dangerous and negligent practices at Fiskville.

I would like to finish with a line from *We Made the Most of It*, the school’s history book, written by my Mum, Marg Card, and Ella Young:

The parents, teachers and pupils of Fiskville can be justly proud of their achievements, proud of the children who have grown and those who will grow to become good and happy people, contributors to their community, devoted to their children and committed to their future, as were the founders and all the participants in the lives of the 295 children who have attended Fiskville State School 4518. The CFA could learn from our little school.

That is all.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you. That was really good. I want to ask you a bit about the CFA and any contact you have had with them or their representatives at all. Have you approached them or have they approached you in any way to talk about what has happened to you and your experience?

**Mr CARD** — No, they have not. No-one has approached me.

**The CHAIR** — And even now, have they not had any contact with you at all?

**Mr CARD** — No, not the CFA.

**Mr McCURDY** — In terms of the procedures and the way things worked at Fiskville, since the disclosure of all the health issues that have come out, do you know of any changes that have taken place? I think you also talked about it being a bit of a cover-up by the CFA in terms of non-disclosure of the health risks. Are you aware of any changes that the CFA has made or tried to implement?

**Mr CARD** — I am not directly aware of any changes. I am certainly aware of the change of government and the initiation of the inquiry, and that is likely to put or sink the boot in to create change. That is certainly what I hope to see. As Mr Etherton said, there are things that are hearsay, and in country communities word travels. I certainly hope there will be change, and I think it is coming.

**Mr YOUNG** — As a student in the area at the time, what was the school’s attitude and the general feel or message to the kids? Were you discouraged from going near the site or anything like that?

**Mr CARD** — Yes and no. I am not sure if you are aware of where the school was located on the actual grounds. It is not there anymore. It was at the front corner of the block, so it was some way away — about

500 metres, I think — from the actual training PAD itself. So, from eight kids, for one to disappear way over to the PAD at lunchtime or something would be very odd behaviour indeed. So it was not a long time ago; it was not spoken about in terms like, ‘Don’t go over to the PAD’.

I mentioned in my submission that we had our school play, so we did actually go up there as a group; we walked or drove. It was quite exciting. When we were kids it was exciting to see fire trucks, flashing lights and whatnot, and smoke billowing. It was cool. We would go over there, organised, but I never went over there without permission or just snooped about.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — Thanks for your time, Dave. That was very insightful, and thank you for sharing your story. I just have a question about the Monash health study that was put forward that focused on firefighters. There was, as you might be aware, a higher proportion of people with testicular cancer. What are your thoughts on a broader health study in that regard? I am assuming that you were a student there at the time, but maybe you could elaborate a bit further on that. That stat is a key thing, I think, at about 6½ out of 100 000.

**Mr CARD** — Yes, I think it is interesting. As to my thoughts on the Monash report, it was quite heavy reading for myself.

**The CHAIR** — You are not the only one.

**Mr CARD** — No, I am not the only one. I may be wrong, but it seems to me and it is my understanding that it seems quite narrow. As a student at the school I was not included as part of the study, and I do not think any student was, so once again I feel that Fiskville pride to be here talking on behalf of the students. There were only 295, and there were only around about 100 in the time frame that the inquiry is looking at, from 1970 to the present day. So I think it is important to look at the health effects of potential exposure from the drinking water, the smoke, just walking past the PAD — —

I was looked after in those houses behind the training PAD. Just the general exposure needs to be looked at. The difference between being a child and a training firefighter is something that needs to be looked at by the Monash report, so it needs to be opened up, including the hundreds of employees that worked there. Whether they were cleaning the gutters or signing off on policy, there were a lot of people there who were not necessarily included in that study.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — Yes. I think the higher proportion of people with testicular cancer — that rate that we heard about this morning — lends itself to that as well.

**Mr CARD** — Before I arrived here I quickly looked at the online news and saw that it was exceptionally high for the people within the study and the high exposure. However, in the medium group it was marginally higher, and in the low risk group it was not high. But I know of someone who has made a submission who had testicular cancer. I have never met anyone who has had testicular cancer, and have never met anyone who has had it twice. But it is my understanding that there is more than one person making contributions to this inquiry who have had testicular cancer twice. Obviously they will be drawn to this, given their personal situations, but if they have been to Fiskville, like I said, it does not add up. So, coming back to your point, I think the study needs to be broadened.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Thank you, Dave. I was not going to ask you any questions around your personal issues, but I will say that my stepbrother had testicular cancer as well, and I appreciate and sympathise with what you have gone through.

I guess my question, though, is in relation to the school, and that is basically where you have put the attention in your submission. You mentioned the Kennett era, so I assume it must have been in the 1990s that the school was closed. At that time were there any complaints about any sort of physical response to being so close to Fiskville? If so, invariably that would broaden our inquiry out to the people who lived around Fiskville and whether they actually were impacted. I am not sure whether anyone was actually asked to submit as a witness in the Joy investigation about their school days. Were you contacted and asked to participate as a witness and provide a submission to the Joy report and/or were any other children who were at the school at that time asked to do so?

**Mr CARD** — Not to my knowledge, no. I was not asked to contribute to the Joy report, and I do not know if anyone else was asked either from the school or from nearby areas.

**Mr RAMSAY** — While you were at the school was there any physical condition that you or any other student had that was thought to be directly related to the smoke, the water or whatever at Fiskville itself?

**Mr CARD** — It is reflective for me to look at it. At the time the doctors were not saying that to me. I developed asthma, and that was in the same year — this has only sort of dawned on me — but the doctors were not saying to me, ‘You have asthma because you go to school at Fiskville’. It was, ‘You have asthma because you are a growing kid and this is what happens’. No-one was saying, ‘Oh, you are sick. It is probably because you are at school at Fiskville’, or ‘You have got a cold’. People were not saying, ‘It is because you are at Fiskville’.

Again, I refer back to Brian Potter, who was the brave man who blew the whistle. He had a lot of inside knowledge and he said ‘Look, there were a lot of people coming away from there with asthma or a cold or whatever’. That may not necessarily have been related, but I do not know that.

**The CHAIR** — Did you say that you did drink the water, which I am assuming was tank water, at the primary school?

**Mr CARD** — I am not sure what the supply was, but I drank the water there, yes.

**The CHAIR** — The reason that I ask is that I think Mrs Potter’s evidence was that they did not drink the water, but then I know others did. I was wondering whether there was any question at the time about the water.

**Mr CARD** — Not for me. I was 11 years old.

**The CHAIR** — But just in terms of the school, I suppose, or if it tasted awful, or some that people did not have it.

**Mr CARD** — I cannot recall that. I cannot recall the taste of the water, but we just drank it.

**The CHAIR** — So we are talking 125 or so students, which is a really small number that it would not be all that difficult to contact in terms of doing some study. Do you have any contact now with any of those children from the primary school?

**Mr CARD** — No, I do not. I counted 114.

**The CHAIR** — One hundred and fourteen, sorry.

**Mr CARD** — That is all right. I think I just said it was around about 100, but there were 60 males, and that is from 1970 until now.

**The CHAIR** — Okay, so it would not be a very difficult study — —

**Mr CARD** — So they definitely would be contactable. I have a list of the enrolment here, so they definitely would be able to be contacted.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — Just another question, Dave. Your parents moved into the region. Were they staff at Fiskville? What is their story?

**Mr CARD** — No. We lived about 10 kilometres away by road, so probably a little bit closer, and we had always lived in the area.

**The CHAIR** — You rode your bike 10 kilometres, did you?

**Mr CARD** — Yes. I think about that, without looking, yes, I used to ride my bike. But it was a close community. It was a single classroom, there were eight other kids in the school. I was the only grade 6 boy, and there were only a few other boys, and I think the next oldest was in grade 2 or 3, so it was a fairly lonely grade 6, if you like. But there was that tightness of community. I mean, I was a very active kid. The parents would sit around and talk for ages, and I was like, ‘Well, I’ll just ride my bike home’. But we had always lived

within half an hour of Fiskville. The time that I went to school at Fiskville we had lived in the same place for seven years, and Fiskville was right in the middle of that.

**The CHAIR** — Did smoke or anything get to where you lived, or was it a long way away, so nothing happened?

**Mr CARD** — No, I do not recall it being near, at home.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — Have they had any reflections since your time there, any concerns, or with other parents at all at the time, during that 1990s period? Were there any concerns raised that they reflect on now, the present day?

**Mr CARD** — To be honest I do not know many people from around there. But it is all coming back to me — the names of people long forgotten — and reading submissions and actually discovering locals that you did not realise have been afflicted with cancer or illness of some kind, it is kind of new for me.

I mentioned that I was lucky. I think that I am lucky. Not many people, I think, possibly get testicular cancer and have the opportunity to perhaps pin down what might have caused it. For a long time it had been a mystery for me.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you. It is really important for us to hear what you have to say. If there are any other suggestions or whatever that you can think of — I know it is a bit hard on the spot — we would love to hear any ideas. Thank you so much.

**Mr CARD** — I do have three points.

**The CHAIR** — Good.

**Mr CARD** — I have probably brushed on them already.

**The CHAIR** — We will write them down.

**Mr CARD** — The things that I would like to see, not just on my behalf but on everyone's behalf are: that if there is a link between the time spent at Fiskville and any illnesses of any nature, the inquiry provides those people with justice and answers; that if the training facility is closed for good, a new one be built in the area and region; and that the management of the CFA take ownership of their decisions and actions and that the future leadership is transparent. That is all.

**Mr RAMSAY** — That is fair and reasonable.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — That is great, David.

**Mr CARD** — Thanks.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much.

**Witness withdrew.**