

Opening Statement for Acting Secretary, Mr Simon Lewis

Thank you Chair and good evening senators. It is a great privilege to sit before you tonight as Acting Secretary of the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

I would firstly like to acknowledge the excellent work of the outgoing Secretary Mr Ian Campbell.

During his term as Secretary over the last five years, Mr Campbell fulfilled his role with professionalism and dedication. Under his leadership the Department has been able to position itself strategically to respond to the many challenges arising from the high level of ADF operational tempo over recent years. He also consolidated the Department's approach to supporting the Centenary of Anzac in 2015, an issue about which I know he is very passionate.

One initiative I know that he is particularly proud of is the establishment of the On Base Advisory Service – OBAS. Currently on

35 Defence bases, this initiative has helped bring DVA closer to ADF members and increase their awareness of our services.

Mr Campbell took a particular interest in ensuring that the needs of younger war widows and children were quickly and effectively met by DVA and ensured that DVA adapted and evolved to meet the needs of contemporary clients,

I trust that all members of this committee will join me in wishing Mr Campbell a speedy recovery from his recent illness and our best wishes for his retirement.

During my most recent appointments within the Department of Defence I grew to appreciate the level of care and support that is provided by DVA to both current and former Defence personnel and the important role that DVA plays in ensuring this care is of the highest standard.

My first few weeks in this job have only served to reinforce to me the extensive range of services, support and activities that the Department undertakes and the challenges that we face, in particular:

- Preparing the organisation for the draw down from Afghanistan;
- Enhancing the services we deliver to our clients;
- Ensuring that our planning to commemorate the centenary of the First World War, especially Gallipoli in 2015, delivers on the expectations demanded by government and the community; and
- Engaging closely with the broader veteran community.

All Australians are rightfully appreciative of the sacrifices being made by ADF members and their families as a result of current operations in Afghanistan. As a former senior leader in the Department of Defence I am only too aware that 39 fine Australians have tragically lost their lives in the conflict so far. Many more servicemen and women are returning from Afghanistan with life changing injuries.

By the time the draw down from Afghanistan is completed in 2014, approximately 60,000 ADF personnel would have been involved in

operations since 1999. As these men and women are transitioned back to a military career or into civilian life, it is essential that both Defence and DVA are ready to provide high quality services and support to them and their families.

As Secretary of DVA, I am committed to ensuring that this transition is as easy as possible for our veterans and that there is continuity of care for those wounded, injured or ill as a result of their service.

While DVA is already well advanced in its preparation for the drawdown, I believe that my experience in Defence assists me to shape an enhanced cooperative and integrated approach between the two agencies as the draw down approaches.

I look forward in particular to working in partnership with my former Defence colleagues, the CDF, General David Hurley, and the Secretary of the Department of Defence, Mr Dennis Richardson on these important matters. Through our collaboration I am confident that we

will be able to further improve work processes and cooperation between our two Departments.

DVA is strongly committed to serving the needs of all our clients. We provide support and services to people spanning from the First World War to current day operations. However, we must always ensure that our client focus is adaptive and targeted at the specific priorities facing the veterans and their families.

With the passage of time the demographic of the veteran community is gradually changing, as does the service delivery expectations placed upon DVA. We must adapt to meet these expectations.

I accept that in recent years the Department has worked extremely hard in adapting and enhancing our service delivery platforms to ensure we are meeting the needs of all. But we can always do better,

This is important ongoing work. DVA needs to be well placed to meet the needs of veterans in a flexible and accessible way.

I am committed to ensuring that the Department is positioned effectively to deal with mental health issues facing our veterans returning from recent operations.

To this end, I was privileged in one of my first official duties as Secretary to attend the launch of our Mental Health Strategy on 28 May. My team and I are available to provide this committee with greater detail on the strategy at tonight's hearings.

My arrival has also coincided with the parliament considering new legislation arising from the Review of the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act. Implementation of the legislation will strengthen our capacity to provide effective rehabilitation and compensation services to our clients. Again, my team and I are available tonight to inform you of progress with respect to this issue.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and apologise to Senator Ronaldson in particular, for an error in process within the

Department. This relates to correspondence to around 1,000 clients impacted by the proposed introduction of white cards for Safety Rehabilitation and Compensation (SRCA) clients with long standing health conditions. With the intention of informing these clients of the proposed changes, the Department wrote to these clients advising them of these changes. In error, this correspondence did not acknowledge that the initiative was dependent on legislation currently before the Parliament. This communication activity was ceased by the Department on 26 March. From this correspondence, 12 clients have sought further information from the Department. Formal communication with effected clients will not occur until legislation is in place.

Next year marks the 100th anniversary of the commencement of the First World War. For Australia this conflict remains the most costly in terms of deaths and casualties, with over 60,000 killed and 156,000 wounded, gassed or taken prisoner. From our landing at Gallipoli, to our involvement in the Middle East and the role we played on the Western front, Australia contributed significantly to the Allied victory.

Much work has already been undertaken by the Department in ensuring that this period of national reflection is managed appropriately. I intend as Secretary to build upon this good work and provide government with the high level of planning and support needed to ensure that these events are a memorable experience for all Australians.

I wish to reiterate my intention to engage closely with the Veteran community during my term of Secretary. It is vital that the Department, especially through me and my senior leadership team, keeps open the channels of communication with stakeholders so that we can continue to effectively support our clients and respond to new challenges. We may not always agree on issues, but I want us to be able to resolve our differences in a collegiate and cooperative manner.

In terms of senior departmental changes since the last Estimates hearing, I should also mention the departure of Mr Sean Farrelly, First Assistant Secretary of Rehabilitation and Support and the arrival of Major General Dave Chalmers, First Assistant Secretary of Client and Commemorations.

Finally I have been particularly impressed by the dedication of DVA staff and the complexity of the environment in which they operate on a daily basis. I look forward to supporting and working with them in their endeavours over my term as Secretary.

Chair, in closing I would like to put on record that I am excited by the challenges that my new role will present, as well as the opportunity to work in a Department whose very mission is to support those who serve or have served in defence of our nation and to commemorate their service and sacrifice.

