PRIME MINISTER

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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
LAUNCH OF THE MURDOCH INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH INTO BIRTH DEFECTS - MELBOURNE 17 FEBRUARY 1987

Mr Neil Walford
Professor David Danks
Mr Rupert Murdoch
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen

About 15 months ago, I had the honour, with the Premier, John Cain, of opening the new building for the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research. In its 72 years, that Institute has proven itself a world class medical research institute.

Alongside the growth of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, Melbourne residents have witnessed the growth of two other major institutes of medical research, the Howard Florey Institute of Experimental Physiology and Medicine and the Baker Medical Research Institute.

Tonight we are celebrating the rise of Victoria's fourth medical research institute of national and international significance: the Murdoch Institute for Research into Birth Defects.

The creation of the Murdoch Institute - indeed the flourishing of medical research in Melbourne in general - is the result of the vision, generosity and skills of many people: donors, administrators, and scientists alike.

The goal of the Murdoch Institute is described in the words: "to work towards the day when every child is born healthy with normal abilities". There could hardly be a higher or more worthy ambition.

At this gathering tonight we see some of the people whose generosity has given the Institute the resources to strive towards that goal, and some of the people whose research skills will contribute towards achieving it.

Tonight we formally launch an Institute which in fact has a history of high quality research stretching back over 20 years. Its genesis and growth within the Research Foundation of the Royal Children's Hospital was made possible through the generosity of the Victorian public through the Good Friday appeal, which raised millions of dollars for the research work.

The achievements of that research group are known internationally, especially for discoveries about phenylketonuria; about genetic defects in the utilisation of copper in the body; for the discovery of a number of metabolic diseases; and for the development of methods of diagnosing and treating metabolic diseases. Its computerised syndrome diagnostic system is highly regarded and will shortly be released internationally, possibly to become the world's standard system.

But the transformation of this research group into the Murdoch Institute opens a vital new chapter in its growth.

The Murdoch family's place is already firmly fixed in Australian history thanks to the outstanding contributions made to the Australian community over the decades by Murdochs including Sir Keith Murdoch, Sir Walter Murdoch and Rupert Murdoch.

Western Australia's second University bears the Murdoch name. And now this Institute bears witness to the Murdoch family's generous contribution to the community. It must be unique in Australia for the one family to have given its name to two major institutions - a record of which the family can be proud.

I noticed that some questions have been raised, usually by those not entirely disinterested, about Rupert's "Australianness". I had cause to say at a private function recently, in the presence of many Americans, that the crucial test of his loyalties was provided by the America's Cup challenge off Fremantle - Rupert barracked for an Australian victory! I observed parenthetically that this was one of the very few occasions when Rupert was on the losing end of any contest.

Nothing could better demonstrate his commitment to this country than this extraordinarily generous $5 million contribution by Rupert Murdoch and his family.

By their encouragement and generosity, the Murdoch family, along with a number of other donors, are targetting a very complex medical problem which has serious implications for many Australian families.

In today's Australia, birth defects are the most important paediatric health problem. Each year 5,000 Australian babies are born with birth defects which will kill or cause long-term disability. Each of these births brings anguish to the family concerned - anger, self-accusation, sadness and the long-term burden of coping with a child with an intellectual or physical disability.

The total cost of birth defects to the Australian community cannot be calculated, because one cannot put a price on the heartache and emotional cost suffered by disabled children and their families. However, spending by Federal and State Governments on special services to Australian children suffering intellectual or physical disabilities is in the order of hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

For it is to government that families look for help in coping with problems of this type. Families look to the health services to tell them what is wrong and why it went wrong. Families need help in assisting the child to live with the disability and to maximise its abilities. Government services provide hospitals and special education centres and the transport to travel to and from them. They provide direct financial aid when additional costs are involved. In extreme situations, government agencies are called upon to provide total care and support. Governments are also involved in rehabilitating those many people with disabilities who can learn to take their places in society.

But our responsibilities as a community do not end there. For we must also take the responsibility of endeavouring to protect future generations of Australian children from suffering debilitating birth defects.

This is where Murdoch Institute will make its mark, for research into the causes of birth defects offers the best hope of early detection and prevention of birth defects.

The truism that today's research becomes tomorrow's medical practice has already been borne out in numerous examples such as immunisation against rubella.

Now even genetic diseases are becoming preventable. Early prenatal tests are now available for over a hundred different genetic diseases.

New discoveries of molecular genetics are making prenatal diagnosis available for more and more genetic diseases, including, in very recent years, thalassaemia, haemophilia, muscular dystrophy and cystic fibrosis.

The skills and facilities needed for these diagnoses are specialised, and the tests are not cheap. However, in every one of these diseases the cost of preventing a single case is less than one tenth the cost of caring for a single patient.

Twenty years ago it would have seemed unbelievable that by 1987 scientists would have isolated the defective genes responsible for dozens of genetic diseases and would be using this knowledge for prenatal diagnosis.

Today, the correction of defective genes in the cells of a patient seems hard to believe, yet some scientists anticipate such progress in the next 20 years. The Murdoch Institute may well play an important role in the advancement of science towards the goals of prevention and curative treatment of birth defects.

Located in Australia's largest paediatric hospital, some of the Murdoch Institute's staff are involved in diagnosing genetic diseases and counselling families, and in planning the rational development of services. Others are studying fundamental aspects of biology like the control of gene action, the biochemical processes involved in embryonic development and the role of an essential element like copper in maintaining normal health.

So, in short, to have the Murdoch Institute working in this field can only foster further advances, better techniques, improved health care, and new hope for many families.

It is always remarkable to observe the quality of Australia's research base, which has produced and is producing so many figures of world renown.

These research skills cannot however be acquired or applied by a community without support, including financial support, from many sources.

It is clear Australia has lagged behind Britain, Canada and the USA in private sector support of medical research. But if sport and the arts can become the object of corporate promotion, so surely should medical research.

The private sector donors to the Murdoch Institute are leading the way, I hope, towards significant improvements in level of private support for medical research.

Their support will amount to $9.5 million, which is a very firm foundation indeed for an Australian research institute. It represents great faith in the ability of Australian researchers to compete successfully in the difficult but fundamentally important task the Institute has set itself.

For its part, the Government is pleased to have played a role in backing the venture. It was once popular to criticise low Government allocation of money to medical research in Australia relative to other Western nations. My Government has increased this allocation in real terms each year since it was elected, during difficult years which have seen reductions in research expenditure in many other countries.

Over the years, Government funds have been made available to medical research through the National Health and Medical Research Council. Block grants of large sums for repeated 5 year periods have been awarded by the NH&MRC to the Walter & Eliza Hall Institute, to the Howard Florey Institute and more recently to the Baker Institute. Now the NH&MRC has decided to award Block Grants to the Murdoch Institute as well as to the Garvan Institute in Sydney. The Government's support for the Murdoch Institute amounts to $3.7 million in real terms over five years.

So the Institute we launch tonight is a product of a true spirit of co-operation and collaboration between the private and public sectors. In formally launching the Murdoch Institute for Research into Birth Defects, I convey the Government's best wishes to the Institute and its future; I again express my thanks to the Murdoch family and the other private sector donors for their magnificent gesture; and, beyond the Institute itself, I commend to other research areas in Australia this fine and fruitful example of collaborative effort between the public and private sectors.

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