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PRIME MINISTER

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OPENING OF FERGUSON LODGE

I am honoured to have been asked to share with you today your justifiable pride in the completion of this fine complex.

The buildings stand as a tribute to the inspiration of the late Jack Ferguson, and I'm sure that all of us wish that he could be with us today, for it has been the leadership and dedicated service of people like Mr Ferguson who have revolutionised the care of the handicapped in Australia.

Both the Commonwealth and State governments have contributed to this project, but financial help, although important, is not enough. For without the continuing dedicated work of associations such as the "Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Association of New South Wales", these facilities would be little more than expensive buildings full of expensive equipment.

It is the person-to person contact, the work of volunteers who have a genuine feeling for, and a commitment to, others that finally is the measure of a caring community.

The Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Association sets an excellent example of community service. Spinal injuries have been around for many years, I'm told that the first reported case was in ancient Egyptian times.

Regrettably, however, the incidence of spinal injury has increased markedly in the last few decades, due to war, and more recently - to what might be described as the war of the roads.

That is why it is so good to see that New South Wales now has its own specialised care centre for paraplegic and quadriplegic casualties which follows the outstanding success of similar centres in Perth and Melbourne.

The need for such centres, is incontrovertible. Prior to their introduction, the only accommodation available for quadriplegic persons unable to live at home were such places as nursing homes and geriatric institutions. They were hardly suitable places for a young physically handicapped adult with normal mental faculties.

The new centres give these young people a new outlook on life. They provide a higher standard of nursing care and, at the same time, improve their quality of life.

As I said when I presented the "Handicapped Person of the Year Award" in October last year to Mrs Elizabeth Kosmala - herself a paraplegic - many Australians mistakenly believe that the handicapped cannot achieve a great deal for themselves or contribute to our society. As a consequence our society in the past has all too often exerted a subtle form of discrimination against the handicapped, based on ignorance and sometimes fear of illness and disability.

The handicapped have been regarded as helpless - a view which has given rise to thoughtlessness, disinterest and sometimes active opposition to the disabled.

That's why I'm pleased to see emerging an assertiveness among young people who are handicapped. They want to help themselves.

They want other people to understand that with specific assistance such as modifications to buildings, they can be very useful members of society.

They want useful and productive employment, want to participate in community activities and sport, want to enjoy the freedom of mobility.

The disabled are taking an increasingly prominent role in managing their own affairs. For example, I am particularly impressed by the fact that the "Civilian Maimed and Limbless Association" in this state, has six members on its board of management, including the Chairman and Secretary/Treasurer who are disabled.

Mr President, your own association's achievements are evidence of the change. From a modest beginning 17 years ago the Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Association has grown to an organisation with a total membership in New South Wales of 1,000.

The Association has developed a wide range of vital specialised services. You provide experience and support for the handicapped and their families, but most importantly you promote and enable a greater degree of independence than many have believed was possible.

But the rehabilitation of the disabled cannot be achieved solely by your organisations. You prepare people for the workforce but all too often employers are reluctant to give the person a chance. They do not have sufficiently flexible working arrangements to enable gradual integration of paraplegics and quadriplegics back into the workforce, and even where an employer is willing, the buildings or facilities may prevent access of reasonable mobility.

The new "Design Rules for Access by the Disabled" was published in 1977, however, there is still a long way to go in ensuring equality of access for the handicapped.

Simple matters such as ramps, doorways and passages of sufficient width, and special toilet facilities, are still all too rare in places of employment.

This building serves as a model of what should become the general rule, not the exception, as present. Employers can help by reserving jobs for handicapped people who in many jobs can contribute

as much or more than an able-bodied person. We all have a responsibility to ensure that the creative drive of our handicapped people is fostered and developed so that the disabled can integrate into our community life.

All levels of government can and should help in town planning, in building regulations, in welfare programmes.

All Australians can help the handicapped to improve their opportunities to use their talents, and play their part in society.

Let's all keep this happening.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have great pleasure in unveiling this plaque to officially open the Ferguson Lodge.

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