Australian Government Productivity Commission – Disability Care and Support Submission

As a mother of a child with intellectual and physical disability, and also being recently diagnosed myself with a debilitating disability, I believe Australia needs to introduce a system that protects those most vulnerable and assists the millions of unpaid carers who may be forced to withdraw from the workforce and do a job that they may not chosen to do. Generally, we are expected to pay for our roads, utilities, taxes etc to enable us to receive a good humane service and yet even though a person with disabilities has to pay the same charges, nothing is done to assist those to access the services on the same basis. With that in mind, please find below my submission for the Disability Care and Support.

According to Youth and the United Nations (2010), globally there are over 650 million people living with disabilities with Unicef (2005), estimating that 150 million of these are children. People with disabilities are “the worlds largest minority” (Unicef (2005).

Young or old, human beings are susceptible to disability. Globally the categorisation of children in particular, with a disability has noticeably risen. There could be a variety of logical reasons behind the rise including: advancement in medical technologies, increases in medical interventions, survival rates in premature births, and environmental risk factors such as drug and alcohol abuse, nevertheless disability is rising quickly.

The more we age, the more likely we are to sustain an injury or medical condition that could result in disability.

A rise in disability statistics often precedes a rise in those practices that are regularly highlighted in the media and through national and international organisational campaigns, and because of the direct violation of human rights and Australia’s signatory obligations to various international and national conventions and Acts more effort is needed to educate, enlighten, support and alleviate the emotional and financial pressure on children and families living with disability.

This submission considers some of those discriminatory practices and potential solutions such as early intervention and inclusive education strategies, and a long term support system to help combat disability issues and discrimination.

Globally, discrimination against people with disabilities occurs on a daily basis. Lack of education and poverty are two key catalysts for social exclusion and discrimination. The inclusion of children with disabilities is a matter of social justice and an essential investment in the future of society. Inclusion and education are fundamental in underpinning both a child’s social and economic future, and their cognitive and emotional wellbeing too. It also helps them to evaluate, identify and form relationships, equipping them for future life challenges such as finding employment.

Shut Out report stated that most people with disabilities describe their lives as “a constant struggle” and that “it should not require such extraordinary effort to live an ordinary life” (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2009, pg 2).

Disabled children (and adults) are regularly subjected to direct and indirect discrimination through a variety of sources (such as violence and abuse) and general ignorance of disability. Cases of discrimination are often highlighted in the media and suggest the necessity to raise awareness and introduce disability issues into education, earlier rather than later.

As mentioned, the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights details a number of treaties and Acts that protect human rights and prevent discriminatory practice, Australia is signatory to a number of human rights standards set out in a variety of national and international treaties and Acts, including (but not limited to):

- the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- the Convention on the Rights of the Child
- the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- The Disability Discrimination Act 1992

These Acts and treaties aim to offer guidance and support and inform people of their human rights and the law and further training and awareness would be of benefit to those in the care sector and those most vulnerable.

Numerous reports and studies by most human service agencies and organisations suggest the emergence of widespread education and inclusive early intervention programs are critical. It is widely accepted that inclusion and early intervention are key to providing a fundamental and solid foundation for all children to learn and thrive. This is particularly important for children with disabilities and vulnerable groups such as Indigenous peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse and lower socio-economic families.

Lack of awareness, knowledge and access to services, exacerbates issues such as health, and often contributes to an undiagnosed disability. “Many Aboriginal people are reluctant to identify as having a disability given that they already face discrimination on the grounds of their Aboriginality” (Aboriginal Disability Network, 2004).

Therefore, in order to succeed with these kinds of programs and initiatives, a universal strategy needs to be introduced to underpin inclusive education practice and support to all regardless of their abilities.

The Government has responded to the cry for early intervention and inclusion by releasing a National Early Childhood Development Strategy. Committing $4.4 billion over five years, to address a number of priorities within the strategy to ensure ALL children including Indigenous and those with disabilities are born and remain healthy, can access early childhood education and care, and are provided with support and referral pathways for parents, Indigenous communities and service providers throughout Australia. However, whether this have a significant impact, is yet to be determined. (DEEWR 2009).

Notwithstanding this, more is needed to be done, rhe Australian Bureau of Statistics (1996) state that original disability policies were implemented in 1910, during a time when mortality rates were higher and socio economic statistics were generally very different to what they are now. Simply put, current policies are out of date and out of touch with modern society’s needs and trends, and widely regarded as not meeting social, cultural or financial requirements.

Most sectors would suggest that specialised funded programs would aid better service delivery to the community, family support and counselling sector, as well as increased respite arrangements, and upskilling for individuals or families would improve some of the issues and provide people with the knowledge and information they need to access services applicable to them. Disability is a significant issue, and can affect anyone at anytime, if there are to be any significant changes then most would suggest that a universal approach to assist health, welfare, housing and community sectors to collaborate and offer improved service integration and evaluation to achieve sustainable results to combat the issue long term.

As previously discussed a universal system of government funding for support and education to the person/child with a disability and their carer/s would go along way to assist in this complex issue, and whilst it is clear that governments’ have acknowledged the need for more help and support to all Australians with disabilities, it is still clearly obvious there is a lot of work still to be done.

In 2009 the Australian Government invited Australian communities to answer key questions about particular disability experiences, and those responses were used to inform the Australian Governments’ 2009 Shut Out report, which in turn, feeds into the National Disability Strategy. It is suggested that alongside a major cultural, social and paradigm shift, there is a need for the introduction of a national disability insurance scheme.

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), (2009), indicates that disability is a costly expense to Australia and places a high demand on the social and welfare system. Furthermore, NDIS state that this scheme would be a “no fault” insurance scheme, providing universally accessible benefit to the disabled population, acting as a financial buffer to relieve the strain currently placed on the systems. The methodology focuses “on lifetime needs and claims management” and that the system as a whole “would be much more effective and efficient, as well as fair” (NDIS, 2009, para 8).

Not dissimilar to the National Health System in the UK or the no-fault insurance scheme in New Zealand, the scheme proposes a long term, cost effective solution to the current disability crisis, and focuses on providing benefits for items such as care, home modifications and equipment (to help alleviate the pressure on the current care system). NDIS (2009) also go on to say that the system is universal and not “crisis-driven”, suggesting a radical improvement to the current systematic processes within Australia.

However, accountability measures would need strict enfocement to ensure spending is not spent elsewhere, such as subsidising the larger businesses that are facing financial hardship.

In conclusion, the problem of discrimination and insufficient access to services will deteriorate if the issues of funding and social promotion of human rights are not managed effectively. There is strong need and compelling evidence for a better coordinated and integrated government and non-government social support service. This service would be required to meet the needs and improve the lives of all Australians with an acquired or degenerative disability. Also, streamlining paperwork and processes, improving health and social care and making it easier for families to access, apply and attend support services are all improvements that are critical in assisting this growing problem.

Finally, a major paradigm and attitudinal shift via education and training are also paramount in improving the current circumstances and would help to achieve a common goal of complete equality and recognition of all Australians living with disability, assisting them to contribute, be confident and enjoy the society they live in without any form of discrimination, deficit or social isolation.

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