Disability: time for real change

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To the Editor: With ageing and population growth, the number of people with disabilities is rising. By 2010, it is projected that 1.5 million Australians will have severe or profound limitations to core activity in the areas of self-care, mobility and/or communication.[1]

In 1976, the United Nations proclaimed that 1981 would be the International Year of Disabled Persons, with the aim of promoting the rights of all people with disabilities to participate fully in society and to enjoy living conditions equal to those of other citizens.[2]

Yet today, more than 30 years later, even in a country as affluent as Australia, families struggle to care for children with disabilities, ageing parents look after adult children, and middle-aged people have their lives put on hold while caring for partners or parents with disabilities.

Every aspect of life is affected, including physical and psychological health, employment prospects, and the ability to take holidays and maintain social relationships. While the physical and emotional demands can never be underestimated, an added pressure is the huge financial impact on every family affected by disability. Homes are mortgaged, endless time is spent securing funds for essential equipment, and some individuals reluctantly share their plight with the media.

The time is right to reform the disability sector. We need to shift from the current crisis-driven welfare approach to a planned and fully funded national disability insurance scheme (NDIS) that will underwrite sustained, significant, long-term improvements in meeting the needs of people with disabilities. The models for an NDIS already exist, with fully funded no-fault insurance schemes for people injured in the workplace and in car accidents in several states and territories.

At a forum in October 2007, National Disability Services (the national industry association for disability services) supported the extension of coverage provided by road accident insurance schemes to new groups, a proposal that was endorsed at the recent Australia 2020 Summit.[3]

The NDIS could be funded from a number of sources, including a supplement to the Medicare levy, third-party car insurance or workplace insurance. The costs would be modest and the benefits significant, because an NDIS would be more equitable than current arrangements (whereby a few achieve multimillion-dollar payouts and many others in similar situations receive nothing), and would enable people with disabilities and their families to be in control, make choices and plan their lives with confidence.

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1 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Current and future demand for specialist disability services. Canberra: AIHW, 2007. (AIHW Cat. No. DIS 50.) http://www.ncid.org.au/cstdaalliance/Documents/2007%20-%20unmet%20need%20report.pdf (accessed Nov 2008).

2 United Nations General Assembly. Resolution 31/123. International Year of Disabled Persons. 16 Dec 1976. http://www.un-documents.net/a31r123.htm (accessed Nov 2008).

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