Position Statement:
Universal Housing Design

Multiple Sclerosis Australia (MSA) Position: “Building houses with simple universal design features makes them a viable accommodation option for everyone regardless of age, family needs or any changes a person may experience during their lifetime. It also means they are visitable by everyone regardless of age or ability. Building regulations should require new home construction to incorporate minimum access or universal design features.”

Recommendations

1. The Federal Government should support and appropriately resource the ongoing implementation of Australia’s Liveable Housing Design Guidelines.

2. All governments should support the inclusion of minimum access requirements in the Building Code of Australia as it relates to new and extensively modified housing.

Discussion

Current housing designs do not work for many people: families with young children, older people, people with a temporary or permanent injury or illness. The inclusion of universal design features would facilitate access and ease of use. Existing building regulations do not require any new home construction to include minimum access or universal design features despite the low cost of including these features during construction as against the much larger cost of retro-fit.

Liveable Housing Australia (LHA) is a partnership between community and consumer groups, government and industry. This partnership champions the mainstream adoption of liveable housing design principles in all new homes built in Australia.

The nationally agreed, Liveable Housing Design Guidelines provide technical advice and guidance on the key easy living features that make a home easier and safer to live in for people of all ages and abilities.

Through adopting the Livable Housing Design Guidelines, dwellings will be:
- easier to enter
- safer to move in and around
- more capable of easy and cost-effective adaptation
- designed to better anticipate and respond to the changing needs and abilities of the people who live in the home

For more information see: http://livablehousingaustralia.org.au/design-guidelines.

The study “A Needs Analysis of Australians With MS” (a detailed study to assess the needs of people with MS prepared by Deakin University in collaboration with MS Research, November 2012) found that “most participants lived in their own home without a carer. If they had a carer, that person was most likely to be their spouse/partner.”

1 McCabe M., A Needs Analysis of Australians with MS, November 2012, page 35.

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In relation to housing design, the report of the study stated, “a number of the more physically disabled clients noted a need for adaptations to their current homes to assist them with getting around at home. A few of these clients suggested that such adaptations were too expensive, or inappropriate, due to them residing in a rental property or public housing.

For example, one participant said:

“I had to adapt my bathroom in order to allow room for my wheelchair; this was an expensive process. I need hand rails installed for when I become fatigued, but I can’t start making changes to my rental property; I don’t own it.” (Client)

“Clients can wait up to 5-10 years for purpose built housing.” (Staff)²

The following table was included in the report. Results regarding the percentage of people who require home modifications are highlighted.

Table 22. The percentage of people who require various types of equipment that they do not currently have, and the percentage of those people who cannot afford it.³

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need but don’t have</th>
<th>Can’t afford</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobility aids</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer-related aids</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continence aids</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home modifications to assist with mobility</strong></td>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home modifications to assist with personal care</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car modifications</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other equipment (e.g. lifting aids, special beds)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Heating or cooling</strong></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study also addressed the needs of people with MS according to the severity of their symptoms. The report stated that “as the symptom severity increased so too did the need for equipment...just under a quarter of the participants in the severe group, and to a lesser degree the moderate group, did not currently have, but needed, mobility aids, home modifications, car modifications, and other equipment. Yet nearly half of those participants could not afford such equipment.”⁴

The report made the following recommendation that included reference to home modifications:

“6.4 Environmental Needs (Equipment and Transport)

a) It is recommended that people with MS receive greater financial assistance to allow them access to equipment and/or modifications that they currently need, but cannot afford. This includes the following types of equipment/modifications: Mobility aids, computer related aids, home modifications, heating and cooling, and car modifications.

b) Larger pieces of equipment appear to be too expensive for participants.”⁵

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About Multiple Sclerosis Australia (MSA)

MSA is the national peak body for people living with MS in Australia. Our role is to work on behalf of all state and territory based member organisations to provide a voice for people living with multiple sclerosis across the country to support the development of:

- Research
- Advocacy and Awareness
- Communication and Information
- Services provided by our member organisations
- International Collaboration

MSA advocates across all stakeholders, governments and communities, on behalf of our members, to represent people who are diagnosed with the disease, their carers and the broader MS Community.

Contact us:

For more information you can contact MSA at info@msaustralia.org.au or call (02) 8484 1315

Reference; Multiple Sclerosis International Foundation’s (MSIF) Quality of Life Principles; Principle 10, regarding; Housing & Accessibility of Buildings in the Community