

Have wheels, will travel. It's a joke

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You see a lot more people on the streets in wheelchairs when you visit cities such as London, Manchester, San Francisco, New York or Vancouver than you do in Sydney. You even see more in Melbourne.

"Where are all the people with disabilities," asked the US-resident friends of one Sydney wheelchair user, Julia Haraksin, when they visited her in the Emerald City. Haraksin, who works in the CBD, says the answer is all about transport. Transport is the key to work, community participation and building friendships.

Haraksin, 46, has used a wheelchair all her life because of brittle bones and small stature. She is 90 centimetres tall. A university graduate, she has always worked and supported herself. Her husband, Ian, also uses a wheelchair and works in the city. Before she migrated from Los Angeles to Australia in 1990, she had been catching buses to work since 1985.

"When I spoke of riding buses to work here I was told, 'It will never happen in Sydney,' " she says.

There has been significant progress since then, largely driven, Haraksin believes, by the 2000 Sydney Paralympics, which attracted hundreds of athletes with disabilities who had expectations based on their international experience of accessibility.

The problem is that progress is piecemeal and the federal legislation that is driving the change now, the Disability Discrimination Act, gives those responsible for public places and services up to 20 or 30 years to ensure that people with disabilities are treated equally.

For example, building standards in Australia are still not consistent with the legislation. "We've been working for 10 years to upgrade the standards and they're with the minister at the moment," says the Disability Discrimination Commissioner, Graham Innes.

Why is it taking so long? "There is a degree of apathy and antipathy to accepting that people with disabilities deserve an equal opportunity in the community to everyone else," explains Innes, a lawyer with 30 years' experience who has been blind since birth and who completed his law exams in braille.

He relies on his guide-dog and technology such as computers with braille printouts. This life-enhancing technology would be inaccessible financially if he didn't work.

Which brings us back to transport, the key to getting to work, reliably and on time.

Macquarie Bank recently launched Lime Taxis, a Mercedes-Benz fleet of wheelchair-accessible vehicles. It's promising 240 taxis within 12 months, priority

for people with disclosed disabilities and specially trained staff. Ambulant cynics are suggesting it's a back-door route to acquiring lucrative taxi licences, but wheelchair users are cheering. However, even with the 50 per cent taxi subsidy from the state, taxis are an expensive and lonely way to travel. According to the Report on NSW Accessible Transport released last year, only 6.4 per cent of Sydney taxis are wheelchair-accessible. That's 320 out of 4983, which translates into a lot of waiting for a taxi. In Manchester and London all taxis are accessible to wheelchair users.

"I was amazed by the ease with which I could travel around London with accessible cabs and buses that lower their floors," says Fiona Smith, chairwoman of the Equal Opportunity Commission of Victoria, who uses an electric wheelchair. In London you can travel on the trains as well.

The situation for wheelchair users in Sydney is very different. Our transport system is like a giant jigsaw puzzle, where only some of the pieces fit together.

You can catch some buses and some trains, but often they do not connect. And if you make it to your destination, there's no guarantee you'll be able to get into the building.

CityRail is trying hard and has invested \$385 million since it launched the Easy Access program in the mid-1990s. This financial year \$48.4 million has been allocated to upgrade 12 stations and RailCorp is committed to making all new stations accessible. State Transit is buying more buses that can accommodate wheelchair users.

But if you are a wheelchair user, this is what you face right now on the CityRail network that extends as far as Newcastle, Scone, Goulburn, Muswellbrook, Bomaderry and Lithgow.

There are 89 independently accessible stations (29 per cent) and a further 63 that are accessible only with the help of a friend or carer (21 per cent).

(Victoria's Companion Card scheme allows a friend of a person with a significant disability to travel for free, and it guarantees free entry to thousands of events and locations with participating businesses. NSW is the only state not yet planning to introduce a companion card).

If you're travelling alone in Sydney, you can't get on or off a train at more than 70 per cent of stations. In Melbourne, all but two Metro stations are accessible and the railway staff, in my experience travelling with wheelchair users, are much more friendly and relaxed about running out with the portable ramp that enables a wheelchair user to get on or off the train.

In the Sydney metropolitan area, 746 of the 1719 State Transit buses are wheelchair-accessible (43 per cent), as are 254 of the 1288 private buses (20 per cent). On the routes advertised as accessible, only some of the buses are equipped, so wheelchair users often sit and watch up to 10 buses whizz by before one arrives that they can board. State Transit recommends you ring the day before you travel to make sure an accessible bus is available when you need it.

People in wheelchairs yearn for the flexibility, spontaneity and freedom that cities with accessible, integrated transport can offer. Surely we can do better than this, and sooner rather than later?