

1-1-2000

Disability Tourism Dollars in Western Australia Hotels

Martin O'Neill

Edith Cowan University, null@ecu.edu.au

Jane Knight

Curtin University, Western Australia, null@curtin.edu.au

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Recommended Citation

O'Neill, Martin and Knight, Jane (2000) "Disability Tourism Dollars in Western Australia Hotels," *Hospitality Review*: Vol. 18: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/hospitalityreview/vol18/iss2/7>

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Abstract

As the Western Australian hotel sector continues to look for new opportunities, people with disabilities are being acknowledged as a consumer group with considerable revenue earning potential. The authors report on findings from the initial stages of a three- part methodology aimed at investigating current awareness of and provision for the disability issue within the Western Australian hotel sector.

Keywords

Martin O'Neill, Tourism

Disability tourism dollars in Western Australia hotels

by Martin O'Neill
and Jane Ali Knight

As the Western Australian hotel sector continues to look for new opportunities, people with disabilities are being acknowledged as a consumer group with considerable revenue earning potential. The authors report on findings from the initial stages of a three-part methodology aimed at investigating current awareness of and provision for the disability issue within the Western Australian hotel sector.

Tourism and hospitality professionals in Australia are continuously bombarded by a proliferation of laws, court cases, and government regulations affecting every aspect of business operation. While government is traditionally seen as having three primary roles in relation to tourism, i.e., regulating, deregulating, and subsidizing, it is the former that has predominated more recently. While considerable debate has raged around such issues as fair employment, the minimum wage, equal opportunities, and the effects of environmental tobacco smoke, two recent

pieces of legislation have managed to pass operators by with little or no concern being generated.

The Federal Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and Western Australian Disability Services Act (1993) were passed to enable people with disabilities to exercise their rights on an equal basis with other Australian citizens. Both acts make discrimination on the basis of disability unlawful in all areas of public and private life and followed quickly on the heels of their United States equivalent, the Americans with Disabilities Act. At the time of its introduction, Woods and Kavanaugh described this act as the "most far-reaching piece of civil rights legislation ever to confront the hospitality industry, shaking its very foundations, both in terms of employment practice and the provision of public accommodation."¹

In direct recognition of the huge earning potential from this sector, a joint industry and state

government initiative entitled "Accessing New Markets" was launched in March 1996. This initiative had three principle objectives:

- raise industry awareness about customers with disabilities and how they could better provide for their needs
- expand industry's traditional customer base in search of the *tourist dollar* from people with disabilities
- improve the quality of life for people with disabilities by providing a level of service comparable to that which non-impaired members of the community expect as a right

New market opens

But what exactly does this mean for the full range of hospitality businesses that are now keen to take advantage of this new market opportunity? More significantly, how prepared is industry in terms of awareness and facility provision to do just that? To date there has been limited research into most aspects of people with disabilities in either the tourism or hospitality sectors. While there have been a number of papers highlighting the potential of people with a disability as a tourism market segment both in Australia² and internationally,³ these have been mainly anecdotal and relatively small scale.

Indeed, any review of the literature will testify to a severe

dearth of empirical work in this area. While Darcy,⁴ in conjunction with Tourism New South Wales, has responded to this challenge in the form of a recently published paper entitled "Anxiety to Access," he has, like others before him, concentrated solely on the issue of demand, neglecting the broader supply sector implications. The present study was designed to investigate the access provision for people with disabilities within the Western Australian hotel sector.

While to date no specific study has been undertaken to ascertain the exact size of this potential market segment, the Office of National Tourism in Canberra has indicated that in Australia three million people have a disability; that represents 18 percent of the population. Further, it is anticipated that as Australia's population ages, this figure is expected to rise to one-in-five people over the next decade.⁵ Comparably, in Western Australia, the Disability Services Commission stated that there are over 300,000 people classed as having a disability. Once again this figure is predicted to rise to 600,000 by 2021.⁶ It is not surprising, therefore, that this group, together with support carers, friends, and relatives, constitutes a large potential consumer market for the tourism and hospitality industry. This point is well illustrated by the Office of National Tourism which states that "tourism and hospitality operators who do not cater for this market

segment, which can also include seniors and convalescents, could miss out on a significant market share.⁷

Some services exist

People with disabilities want to enjoy travel and leisure experiences, but reports indicate that in the main their travel experiences are characterized by inaccessible accommodation and tourism attractions.⁸ A number of tourism providers in Australia and overseas have moved toward providing a high standard of service to people with disabilities and are benefiting from this approach. Examples of best practice include Warner Brothers, Movie World on the Gold Coast, and U-Drive in Tasmania.

On the international front, a special air travel transportation system has been designed to remove barriers to travel for people with disabilities. The Air Carrier Access Act ensures that no air carrier might discriminate against a person with a disability in the provision of air transportation and has been effective since April 1990. This act is a major advance and represents one aspect of a comprehensive adaptive air travel system for people with a disability. Many of these components are operated by different businesses that work independently of each other, so coordination is vital to ensure the same level of service provision as that offered to able-bodied people.⁹

In Western Australia, this

unexplored segment of the tourism market has captured the interest of the business community; eight industry associations, such as the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Tourism Council Australia, the Australian Federation of Travel Agents, and the Western Australian Hotels Association, have endorsed the "Accessing New Markets" strategy. This initiative, as launched by State Premier Richard Court, was an innovative partnership between the Disability Services Commission and the broad business community. Its primary aim was to improve access for people with disabilities to the private sector and initially targeted the hospitality, tourism, retail, and entertainment industries.¹⁰

Service needs noted

More specifically, this initiative sought to inform industry of the full market potential of this unique segment and to highlight the specific customer service needs of people with disabilities. Industry specific guides detailing evidence of best practice and the benefits to be accrued from servicing the needs of the segment of the community were also made available. The hospitality industry guide, for example, provides information on facilities such as parking, accommodation, telephone, and toilets. It also provides advice on how to deal with customers with differing types of disabilities.¹¹ More importantly, this initiative was to force the disability issue

back onto the industry agenda. In turn, this has led the wider WA tourism community to reconsider how businesses are currently servicing the needs of this key market segment and whether they are meeting their relevant legislative requirements.

Many are disabled

Surveys by the Australian Bureau of Statistics¹² suggest that considerable numbers of Australians have a disability, and in the direct case of WA, this is estimated to be around one in six people. In addition, it is estimated that 50 percent of people 60 years and over also have a disability; types range from hearing, vision, and mobility impairment to intellectual impairment and psychiatric disorders.

Not surprisingly, both federal and state governments have enacted various pieces of legislation in order to protect the rights of those people classed as having such disabilities. Principal among these has been the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992)¹³ and the Disability Services Act (1993).¹⁴ Both pieces of legislation require government departments, public authorities, and the tourism industry to ensure that people with disabilities have the same fundamental rights as the rest of the community. Indeed, legislative information provided by the Office of National Tourism in "Tourism Challenges: Access for All"¹⁵ stipulates that tourism providers are subject to

all requirements of the DDA, which means that all premises, goods, and services used by the public must be accessible to people with disabilities. Failure to provide equal access is illegal, unless it imposes unjustifiable hardship, e.g., causes major difficulties or involves excessive cost for an organization. Additionally, the Disability Services Act (1993) specifically relates to access to appropriate accommodations and services and for people with disabilities to have the opportunity to make decisions which affect their "normal daily lives."¹⁶

Access is issue

According to the Disability Services Commission, the principal issue is one of access and the fact that present design limitations in many buildings effectively disbar people with certain types of disability from entering. In putting forth the case for access improvements, the commission suggests that the entire community and, in particular, seniors will benefit from such changes.¹⁷ Of course, access is about much more than just physical disability, which is a point well made by Darcy¹⁸ who identifies three main dimensions to the disability issue:

- **physical access:** involves those people with physical disabilities requiring the use of wheelchairs or walking aids and require the provision of, for example, handrails, ramps, lifts, and lowered counters

- **sensory access:** involves those people with hearing or sight disabilities requiring the provision of, for example, tactile markings, signs, labels, hearing augmentation-listening systems, and audio cues for lifts and lights
- **communication access:** involves those people who have difficulty with the written word, vision, speech, or hearing or who are from other cultures

Outlining the legislation further, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission¹⁹ states access applies to a variety of public areas and services, including information services, such as travel agents, cafes, restaurants, libraries, transport, shops, theaters, and other places of entertainment. Information also needs to be provided in a suitable format for people with disabilities. According to Darcy, without physical access to transportation, buildings, and sites, “people with disabilities are excluded and this affects tourism and leisure providers. Accessibility is about inclusive marketing rather than seeing it as an obstacle to be overcome.”

Stage one is exploratory

The first stage of the research was exploratory in nature and involved a qualitative research approach. Twenty-five personal interviews were conducted with people in organizations considered to have a vested interest in the

research findings. This included hotel general managers or operational managers from a range of two to five-star properties, and representatives from disability agencies, local government, and tourism organizations.

Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit deeper and more personal observations²⁰ about the disability access issue in the Western Australian hotel sector. Since the research objectives were exploratory, the interview methodology permitted a considerable degree of flexibility. This enabled the establishment of a framework within which interviewers were free to modify question order and wording, give explanations, and, where appropriate, include additional issues in the face of a rapidly changing strategic environment. According to Denzin and Lincoln²¹ this methodology was considered appropriate for exploratory research, since it was felt that this method had the potential to yield rich and highly illuminating material on this topic.

Similarly, because the research project was exploratory, a convenience sampling strategy was considered appropriate because the emphasis was on generating ideas and insights.²² Because the project was constrained financially, the hotels chosen were relatively accessible as they were within a close geographical region. Central business district (CBD) hotels also offered a broad range of room types, hotel size, hotel classifica-

tions, and ownership patterns and were included in the sample to explore the different approaches toward meeting the hospitality needs of people with disabilities.

Perth is site

Interviews were held with 15 hoteliers from all Royal Automobile Club (RAC) hotel-grading classifications within the Perth CBD area. In a number of instances, while general managers were the initial point of contact, responsibility for participation in the interview was passed to other members of the staff. In short, they were deemed to be much more conversant with the relative legislation and the property's operational policies, practices, and procedures as they related to disability access. In addition, interviews were held with representatives from the State Disability Services Commission, Tourism Council Australia, the Western Australian Hotels Association, ACROD, the Independent Living Center, Better Heartng Association, and ACTIV Foundation. Endorsement for the research was also received from the State Minister for Disabilities.

Interviews lasted up to an hour and involved a series of open-ended questions, which were in simple language, free of industry jargon and avoiding ambiguity and leading questions. Questions were asked about hoteliers' awareness of the size and value of the disability market, disability legislation, facilities and services pro-

vided, marketing activities, and recruitment and training practices. Interviews were independently transcribed and a detailed thematic analysis ensued. Where appropriate, follow-up telephone calls were made to seek further clarification and explanation during transcription, thus improving reliability. The interviewers then cross-checked the transcription against notes made to ensure that transcription was both accurately and reliably documented. The transcribed files were then analyzed for content using the qualitative software package ZY Index. The results from the software were critically analyzed by the two authors to determine patterns and structure from the data, and each author made comparative evaluations to ensure validity and reliability during analysis.

Stage two involves survey

The second stage of the research involved surveying a representative sample of all hotels, motels, and guesthouses in Western Australia drawn from the 319 RAC graded properties. The survey sample was restricted to RAC-graded properties only in order to ensure some form of standardization within and between establishments and classifications. As the RAC does not distinguish property sizes, the research instrument allowed for this distinction with a question addressing the size of each property.

Each of the properties received a questionnaire consisting of both

open and close-ended questions addressing the disability issue and their attempts at dealing with it. Advice was sought from the WA Disability Services Commission and ACROD, the peak council of organizations providing services in the disability field, when designing the questionnaire to obtain feedback on the type of facilities required under current legislation. On the advice of both bodies, the actual survey content was based largely on ACROD's most recent guidelines for accommodating travelers with disabilities, with the addition of various property-profiling questions.²³ These guidelines were based upon section D3 of the Building Code of Australia (BCA, Section D3) which requires that accommodation providers comply with Australian Standard (AS) 1428.1 (Design for Access and Mobility). This standard sets out the minimum mandatory design requirements to make an accommodation unit accessible to people with disabilities and seeks to ensure that access is provided not only to accommodation units, but also to all public areas within such units.

The questionnaire mirrored the specifications set out within this standard and, as such, served as an audit of existing provision by this sector for people with disabilities, including both public areas and private guest bedrooms.

These sections related to public areas addressed the issues of guest arrival, car parking, reception, entrances, getting around,

signage, pathways, ramps, stairways, handrails, lifts telephones, public toilets, and food and beverage facilities. Questions asked in the context of the actual bedrooms, on the other hand, addressed the unit entrance, circulation within the unit, guest bathrooms, and furniture. Operators were required to provide either a "yes" or "no" answer in relation to their facilities compliance with each of the design specifications laid out in the standard. In addition, respondents were provided with an opportunity to address any other comments in the context of each question.

Research identifies themes

The initial qualitative stage of the research identified some interesting findings.

- **Awareness of legislation:** Of great concern was a general lack of awareness among hoteliers of the key relevant legislation relating to people with disabilities and their obligations under the legislation. None of the hospitality providers interviewed were aware of either specific state or federal legislation. This was supported by those interviewed from the disability agencies whose own dealings with industry supported the contention that generally there was a lack of awareness of these issues. While the majority of those interviewed stated that they had received some information from their

representative association concerning their legislative obligations, they insisted that this was some time ago and that the information had not been followed up in any meaningful way.

One interviewee stated that legislation is only as effective as the people who make complaints, and generally people with disabilities are not complaining. This view was shared by the various disability agencies who believed that people with disabilities needed to be much more assertive about their needs. As a result, there is little evidence of state or federal lobbying on this issue.

In part, this may be attributed to the fact that existing disability acts lacked any credible legislative power, unlike the American disabilities model (ADA 1992) where strong penalties are imposed for failure to comply with ADA and courts are empowered to assess penalties against an employer of up to \$50,000 for the first offense and up to \$100,000 for subsequent offenses. One interviewee also stated that while organizations are putting in their plans for building approval, in practice there is no official monitoring inspection carried out at the site regarding what is being built. One respondent reported that a lack of knowledge and understanding were major problems in the commercial sector.

• **Awareness of market potential:** While the majori-

ty of those interviewed were aware of the Accessing New Markets initiative, very few hoteliers were aware of the size and value of this potential market segment and the accruing benefits for their organization in meeting their needs. This issue was well addressed by Darcy who in a study of people with disabilities undertaken in New South Wales showed that 74 percent of those interviewed would like to travel more and that they represent a substantial section of the tourism market.

A further study of island resort managers in North Queensland²⁴ found that the majority vastly underestimated the potential size of the market for tourists with disabilities. One of the issues identified within this study related to the issue of cost/benefit analysis and the likely return from the disability sector relative to modification outlay costs. This can be attributed to a lack of lobbying activity, information, training, and education. When informed of the actual potential, however, most operators were quite shocked and somewhat concerned at their ignorance of this key market opportunity.

- **Access and facilities provision:** In general, the picture painted by those establishments interviewed is a very dark one for people with disabilities. Indeed, it

would appear that the WA hotel industry is in fact anything but hospitable when it comes to meeting the needs of this section of the community. Even when an establishment stated that it catered to the needs of people with disabilities, further examination revealed that this was often inadequate and that there was often a range of facilities unavailable. In the main facility, provision extended to main entrance/ exit ramps, bathroom and toilet rails, public toilet provision, and wheelchair access throughout the main public areas of each property. The areas covered are generally related more to people with physical disabilities and, specifically, those classed as wheelchair bound. For example, all of the hospitality providers stated that they had wheelchair access, but none of these providers had visual alarms or information available in Braille or on audiotape.

Each establishment was presented with a facilities and amenities checklist addressing the key access requirements that people with disabilities need to stay in hotel accommodations, they were asked to comment on how their property measured up against this checklist. A number of key issues suggesting that hoteliers are not meeting their legislative obligations emerged as follows:

- A hotel may provide rails in the shower/bathroom yet there is limited access to get to these facilities.
- None of the hoteliers provided everything that was on the checklist.
- Reception counters were a particular area of concern as they mainly catered to the able-bodied market.
- Very few hoteliers had purposefully designed disability rooms with wide entrance, low level switches and hand dryers, low level beds, chair lifts and room information written in simple and concise language for people with cognitive disabilities. Of those rooms available, few had ground floor access.
- Access throughout hotels was also problematic with few hotels having lifts to all floors on slow timers, access to reception, pool and bar areas, clear signage, visual alarms, and clear access through the building.
- While the majority of hotels provided special parking bays, often these were uncovered and quite some distance from the main hotel entrance and required that steps be negotiated in order to access the building.
- Cost was often cited as a reason for not implementing change in relation to facility

provision for people with disabilities. A fact that was admittedly overlooked by many was that these facilities could also be utilized by able-bodied guests.

A further area of contention centered on the different types of disability to be provided for. For example, one interviewee from a disability agency stated that the needs of people with an intellectual disability are quite different from those with a physical disability and hoteliers are not meeting both these needs. This is supported by a recent study conducted by the Queensland Tourist & Travel Corporation (QTTC) which found that a lot of properties were assessed by able-bodied people and when a person with a disability arrives "they find that, yes, the room is accessible but you can't get from the car park to the room or you can't get to the reception or the restaurant or that the room isn't accessible at all."²⁵ It is worth noting at this stage that ACROD hopes to enforce a building code making it essential for new hotels to provide at least 10 rooms with disabled facilities.

- **Recruitment and training:** Training and education are without doubt major challenges facing the hotel industry in relation to meeting the needs of people with disabilities. This issue has been highlighted by Vladimir who states that "a sensitive and willing staff

with the right attitude and strong interpersonal skills can overcome many of the barriers persons with disabilities face and turn what may be perceived as an inaccessible property into an accessible one."²⁶

While the majority of hoteliers invested heavily in continuous training and development, none of those interviewed invested time or effort in specific staff training programs to assist them with service provision for guests with disabilities. Additionally, none of the properties surveyed operated a positive discrimination policy aimed at actively recruiting people with disabilities. Not surprisingly, hoteliers admitted that there was a need for increased training for staff working in hospitality in the specific needs of people with disabilities.

One interviewee from a disability agency mentioned that it was a case of "retraining and reminding" and that there should be training at all levels, especially within tertiary level hospitality management programs. This viewpoint is supported by Ohlin²⁷ who suggests that, regardless of how well an establishment has been designed to accommodate people with disabilities, it will be of little value if the staff employed is uncomfortable serving them.

On a more positive note, this issue was addressed as priority number one within the context of the Accessing New Markets. This led to the successful development

and launch of an industry wide training resource package entitled "You Can Make a Difference to Customer Relations for People with Disabilities." This package was launched as a national training product in February 2000 and was designed to demonstrate how tourism-related businesses could modify services and facilities to make them more accessible for all customers, including those with disabilities. The training pack's use of case studies and practical exercises provides an ideal learning methodology to assist in changing provider attitudes and stereotypical perceptions of this lucrative consumer group.

- **Marketing the disability product:** From a marketing point of view, hoteliers need to focus on specific promotional activities targeted at people with disabilities. The majority of those interviewed admitted that they had at no stage actively marketed their product to this segment. Those who did stated that they had experienced a poor response rate, indicating what may be described as ineffective market research, resulting in poor advertising. That the market exists is undisputed, but hoteliers need to focus on how to reach it.

Few operators were also aware of how to market their product to people with disabilities. All the disability agencies stated

that at no stage had they ever been approached by hoteliers seeking specialized marketing advice. The research further highlighted the fact that none of the hoteliers used advertising that features people with disabilities, unaware that this may actually appeal to the public at large.

This view is supported by Murray and Sproats who suggest that brochures need to be produced by the hotel industry that are specifically designed for the traveler with a disability. These brochures should outline not only the availability of services, but should suggest itineraries of the various tourist features in the area. This has been evidenced in a recent initiative by the Queensland Tourist and Travel Corporation in their production of a tourist brochure entitled "Access the Best – Toowoomba."²⁸

- **Other issues:** Few hoteliers were aware of any services provided by other hotels for people with disabilities. This may prove rather problematic in the case of overbooking and referrals. There was also little evidence of hoteliers planning or implementing access improvements as a result of the Accessing New Markets initiative. General consensus was that with the Olympics and the millennium celebrations many think there will be a profitable number of years ahead, regardless of having to chase new markets. What

operators have neglected to remember, however, is the less publicized fact that Australia is also about to play host to the forthcoming Paralympics.

Additionally, disability agencies have cited an increase in the number of inquiries they are receiving from people with disabilities with regard to accommodation bookings and travel planning. This is indicative of the fact that industry is not really catering to the needs of the fully independent disabled traveler. Naturally this provides a unique opportunity for more progressive provision in the hospitality marketplace. It is also worth noting that statistics provided on the size and value of the disability tourism dollar nearly always exclude the fact that people with disabilities often travel with at least one or two caregivers.

Facilities are cited

The next stage of the research revealed in-depth information

about the level of facilities for people with disabilities provided for by the establishments surveyed. The questionnaire was thorough in its approach and focused on provision within all areas of the property, including public transportation, parking, route of travel within the property, room capabilities, and emergency exit and warning systems. Respondents were also invited to comment upon their lack of and awareness of the need for certain facilities. Key respondent statistics are provided in Table 1.

A total of 319 questionnaires were administered to all RAC graded hotels in Western Australia. Over a four-week period, a total of 72 returns were received, representing a return rate of 22.5 percent. The low response rate was attributed to the length of the questionnaire and the depth of information required; 54 percent of all respondents were from RAC graded three-star properties, of which 56 percent had fewer than 50 rooms, and half were independent or owner-operated. This con-

Table 1
Demographic profile of respondents

Value Label	n	%	Value Label	n	%	Value Label	n	%
RAC grade			Number of rooms			Room occupancy		
5 star	2	2.8	250+	5	6.9	20-29	1	1.4
4 star	10	13.9	200-249	2	2.8	30-39	5	6.9
3 star	39	54.2	150-199	1	1.4	40-49	5	6.9
2 star	6	8.3	100-149	7	9.7	50-59	14	19.4
1 star	2	2.8	50-99	17	23.6	60-69	21	29.2
			0-49	40	55.6	70-79	12	16.7
						80-89	7	9.7
						90-100	1	1.4
Missing	13	18.1				Missing	6	8.3
Total	72	100.0	Total	72	100.0	Total	72	100.0

firmed the dominance of small to medium-sized properties in the WA accommodation sector.

Just over 48 percent of all properties were experiencing occupancy levels of 50 to 70 percent, which indicates that it would be advisable for them to explore accessing new markets such as people with disabilities.

As with the initial qualitative stage of the research, these findings related to actual access also paint a pretty bleak picture of the WA hotel industry. The major findings are as follows:

- **Building access:** 84 percent of properties had a designated set down area for buses, taxis, and private vehicles. The access from the entrance, however, varied from three meters for one establishment to 500 meters for another. Almost 85 percent of properties had clearly accessible parking bays near the main entrance, which could be classed as being of a suitable size and surface, with 70 percent of properties having curb ramps. Inside the building, 96 percent of properties surveyed had a clear and accessible route to the reception desk, although only 29 percent had any facilities, such as a telephone typewriter, for people with sight or hearing impairment. Surprisingly, half the properties had a visual and auditory emergency alarm system in place,

with 73 percent having ground floor exit routes accessible to all patrons, including wheelchair users.

- **Travel within the property:** The survey addressed movement within the property, including all doors, walkways, corridors, ramps, steps, and elevators. Interestingly, hoteliers perceived that doors were easy to open, with door handles that allowed the door to be unlocked and opened with one hand, fulfilling the minimum width requirements. However, 67 percent of doors did not open outward. Corridors or landings were also seen to be clear of obstructions, although 73 percent of properties didn't have appropriate handrails. Also, where stairs were provided, only 49 percent of properties had an alternative means of access such as a ramp or elevator large enough for wheelchair access.
- **Room facilities:** The majority of properties surveyed only had one room acceptable for people with disabilities; 80 percent of these rooms had switches and controls accessible from the bed and space to turn a wheelchair. Only 18 percent of rooms, however, had data port facilities, and only 2 percent had facilities in the room for people with hearing impairments. Additional-

ly, 78 percent of respondents had an accessible toilet and basin and easy to grip and lock door handles, but only 52 percent had a grab rail available in the bathroom. Showers were generally accessible; however, only 49 percent had grab rails, while 56 percent had a shower chair available; 57 percent of rooms also had a laundry. Questions were also asked about the provision of dining facilities for people with disabilities; 81 percent of properties had adequate space in the dining room for wheelchair access and easy transfer.

Key points raised in the comment section were that most properties were only small and did not have the resources available to comply with all the necessary legislation. Managers also stated they were more than willing to assist guests who only needed to seek assistance where access was an issue; ramps and curbs, for example, were available on request. Respondents also highlighted that they were tied to the current status of the building and often old buildings weren't designed with access issues prominent. Provision for people with disabilities had therefore been highlighted as priorities as part of future development, restructuring, and refurbishment.

Market is underestimated

While not representative of the entire WA hotel industry, these

limited results nonetheless demonstrate that many hoteliers, in times of oversupply and decreasing occupancies, are unaware of this potential niche market. Additionally, they are not meeting existing legislative requirements in terms of providing for access to their properties. This situation amounts to a very serious form of discrimination against people with disabilities, which over the longer term may prove potentially disastrous for industry as this sector of the community becomes more vocal and begins to exercise its rights under the various pieces of legislation.

While a radical turnaround is required in terms of both provision and practice, it is unlikely, due to cost and time implications, that this can or will occur as quickly as it should. What is required is an all-inclusive and immediate phased reversal strategy that concentrates on a number of key areas.

- **Information:** Without doubt the biggest threat faced by the hotel industry, as a result of this situation, is its very ignorance of its obligations under the legislation. It is imperative, therefore, that industry is informed as a matter of priority. Needless to say, the WAHA, as the key industry association, must take a lead role in any such process. While quick to act initially in terms of advising its members of the enactment of the various

pieces of legislation, it has, it seems, like many within industry, been rather reactive as apposed to proactive in terms of championing the rights of those with disabilities. The legislation needs to be revisited and members urgently informed of their obligations and operational implications in order to protect not only their interests, but also the interests of those with disabilities.

Of equal importance here is the role of the various disability bodies and agencies, which must continue to work hand-in-hand with industry in order to improve and reverse existing practices. These bodies are ideally placed to assist the hotel industry in making the necessary changes required under the legislation and to assist in the running of related staff training programs.

- **Education and training:** Education and training in awareness and sensitivity to disability issues must rank as a top priority for industry. While the recent launch of the Disability Services Commission's "You can make a difference to customer relations" training resource is a positive step in the right direction, the commission must be careful that this resource is not shelved by operators as yet another management fad. The commission must see to it that

staff training in this key area becomes a central part of any induction and/or ongoing staff training scheme.

- **Accessibility:** While there is much that is wrong with the existing WA hotel product, it is highly unrealistic, due to cost and time implications, to presume that this situation can change overnight. What is required is a phased reversal strategy such as that advocated and practiced in the United States, where existing properties should strive to achieve a level of accessibility over time, which balances user needs, the constraints of existing conditions, and the resources available for remedial work.²⁹

Such an approach would require that properties identify and rectify their most obvious failings when it comes to servicing the needs of people with disabilities. In many instances this relates to the issue of physical access and such striking examples as distance of parking bays from the main entrance. Additionally, operators should also address appropriate access ramps, unreceptive reception counters, and location of supposedly disability friendly rooms; access to and location of all public areas should also be addressed. Longer term, major physical restructuring/refurbishment will be required by many

properties, but this should be weighed up in the context of the highly lucrative market opportunity that this sector presents.

There is a fear, however, that if left to devise its own solution to this very sensitive issue that little, if any, meaningful changes will materialize over time. It is essential, therefore, that the various regulatory bodies put strict deadlines and penalties in place for non-compliance, and that operators are informed of both. This would require regular site inspections and ongoing information sessions to protect the interests of both groups.

These are but a few issues requiring immediate attention if industry is to live up to its name in being truly hospitable to all sections of the Australian community. There are significant limitations to this research, not least with respect to the sampling framework applied, the issue of non-response bias, and the generalizability of the results to the entire WA hotel sector. The issue of non-response bias, in particular, is an interesting one, and one which the authors are presently attempting to address prior to beginning stage three of the research process. The majority of non-respondents have been identified as a result of respondents' willingness to include a forwarding address for the dispatch of the final research report. Through a process of elimination, the authors have been able to identify almost all of the 247 non-respondents from the initial questionnaire administration phase.

A fresh copy of the questionnaire will be re-administered to each of these properties, followed by a telephone call approximately one week later in order to increase the actual return rate. It is hoped the improved results of the research will help focus greater attention on the plight of this most neglected segment of the Australian and international community.

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Martin O'Neill is head of the Department of Hospitality Management at Edith Cowan University, and Jane Ali Knight is an assistant professor in the School of Marketing at Curtin University, Western Australia.