

Organisation History

Own Organisation

In 1966, a group of young people with severe spinal cord injuries had been living in the spinal injuries ward of Prince of Wales Hospital, Sydney for over six years.

A strong spirit of determination to become more independent had developed amongst the group and as newly injured people entered the hospital, the “veterans” spurred on the newer people to be equally self-reliant. During that same year the group was advised that the ward was soon to be closed and everyone would be transferred to the newly established spinal injuries unit at Prince Henry Hospital, Little Bay. Soon after their arrival they learned that their beds were needed for newly injured people and that they would gradually be transferred to a geriatric nursing home.

They were desperate to find an alternative. With the help of social worker Gary Garrison, and supported by Dr George Burniston, friends, and other people with severe physical disabilities, they set out to form their own organisation and provide their own accommodation. On 4 September 1967 the Australian Quadriplegic Association (AQA) was constituted in the spinal unit of Prince Henry Hospital and became a registered charity in November of that year.

Foundation Members

The founding members were Trevor Annetts, Tom Clarke, Graeme Dunne, David Fox (AQA's First President), Peter Harris, George Mamo, Jim McGrath, Robert McKenzie, Alan Moore, John Munday, Cecil Murr, Brian Shirt, Paul Sorgo, Stan Wanless, and Warren Mowbray.

The Association's major objectives were accommodation, care and the need to promote unity between people with quadriplegia, provide recreational activities and raise sufficient funds to enable the building of accommodation and employment facilities.

In 1968, Prince Henry Hospital was able to obtain subsidies from the Health Commission of NSW for the lease of a number of beds at Bon Accord Nursing Home in Coogee, to which the group eventually moved.

All Out Effort

In 1969 the Association was granted a lease on land adjacent to Prince Henry by the NSW Health Commission and the Department of Lands where it was planned to erect their dream - an accommodation facility for people with quadriplegia to be called the “Wheelchair Villa”.

In 1973 the Constitution was changed to include people with severe disabilities, not just spinal cord injured.

Progress was slow until a field officer was appointed in March 1974 to promote AQA and investigate avenues for funding. All the group's energies were now directed into building up AQA's funds with local clubs and service organisations being approached, fund raising nights held and appeal campaigns started.

In November 1974 AQA became incorporated under the Companies Act, maintaining a unique clause in its Constitution to ensure that it would remain in the control of people with disabilities. The Association strongly believed that people with disabilities best understood their own requirements and even today, Spinal Cord Injuries Australia is one of the few

charities in this country which requires that a majority of its Board of Directors be people with disabilities.

The Association's activities were carried out from a verandah of the nursing home where many of the original group still lived. Increasing files and paperwork began to constitute a "fire hazard" and arrangements were made with St Michael's Golf Club, Little Bay to take over a disused club house where they could continue their activities.

Laying The Foundations

Due to the urgent need for a permanent administration centre, AQA's Board decided to channel the accumulated funds into the construction of a headquarters/employment centre on the Little Bay site originally intended for the Wheelchair Villa. Construction was completed in September 1976; and AQA's first transitional accommodation, Ashton House, a 21 bed geriatric nursing home at Maroubra, was leased. Many of the group living in the Coogee nursing home then moved to Ashton.

The Board adopted a policy requiring that all residents be involved in some form of activity or employment away from the premises. Residents were given considerable control over their own lives and were able to come and go as they pleased. The residents supported this policy as they believed it would keep them on their toes and make sure that new residents did not look to Ashton simply as a place to while away their time. To this day all residents of the organisation's facilities are encouraged to be as independent as possible and to be fully involved in the community.

Commercial Ventures

Federal Government assistance was sought to help fund the Association's operations but this was refused until it could prove that people with severe physical disabilities could be gainfully employed and live independent lives. AQA took on a number of commercial ventures at its new work centre, Quadriplegic Enterprises, and increased its fundraising activities. In 1977 the first issue of Quad Centre Magazine was published. The name of the magazine was changed to Quad Wrangle in 1979. The involvement of people with disabilities in all levels of management saw the development of skills in accounting, marketing and business acumen. Federal Government assistance was finally negotiated in 1980. In 1980 Ashton House residents produced the Wheeling Free radio program on 2SER FM.

In 1981 AQA was involved with the NSW RTA pilot scheme to code traffic accidents; and that same year the first funded peer support worker was employed.

The Following Years

AQA has since extended its services in NSW and also set up its first interstate service. AQA Victoria was established in 1981 where the membership soon grew and an employment service was introduced. This branch has now become an incorporated body registered in Victoria and operates autonomously.

Kimberley Lodge, a 9 bedroom hostel, was purchased in 1982. Unlike Ashton House, the facility was not staffed and relied on the generic services such as Home Care, available in the community. It was managed entirely by the residents. Also in 1982, The NSW Department of Housing designed and built its first three bedroom house, Stuart House (named after Wendy Stuart), specifically for people with physical disabilities. AQA developed a range of accommodation service models to meet the needs of individuals.

The RTA coding contract began in 1982 and continues today on a three year tendering process. In 1986 the Commercial Operations Centre opened at Mascot. That same year a Regional Office and Resource Centre was established in Wollongong to provide a full range of services to the members and clients in the Illawarra and South Coast regions; and in 1988 the regional service was established in Bathurst.

An accommodation facility in Coffs Harbour was leased in 1990 and in 1991 a purpose-built house in Dapto was leased.

Expanding Services

The services of the Association were expanding and in 1994 AskAQA! information service was launched. There was also a presentation by American disability advocates who lobbied for the Americans with Disabilities Act. This led to AQA seminars on disability rights and political action.

In 1995 AQA began employing Community Services workers throughout NSW who assisted people in their homes and in their workplaces. Also in 1995 Workforce Employment Service began; and another accommodation facility, Chatswood House, was leased.

By 1996 AQA established Network Officers in all states and territories of Australia to provide focal points for members throughout the country to exchange information on local conditions and on issues which impact on people nationally.

AQA instigated the establishment of the Physical Disability Council of NSW in 1996.

In 1997 the AQA website was launched, and a house in Ryde was funded under the NSW Government's ventilator dependent protocol. In 1998 Ashton House closed, and Nagle and Anzac transitional residences opened in Maroubra. An out of hours nursing service was launched as part of Ashton House transition plan for clients in Randwick and Botany Municipalities. This service still operates today.

In 2000 Commercial Operations and Workforce moved from Mascot to Alexandria.

On 1 July 2003 AQA members voted to change its name to Spinal Cord Injuries Australia Limited with the intention of increasing public awareness to all types of spinal cord injuries with the name explaining exactly who we are and what we are about. Quad Wrangle Magazine changed its name to Accord.

In 2004 Peer Support became a fully professional service working with metropolitan spinal units and in 2006 the SCI Ambassadors program was launched along with injury prevention programs Teamsafe (workplace injury prevention) and Wheelies Challenge (schools education). These programs are now run by SCI Australia's Supporter Partnerships Team.

In 2006 land was purchased at Collaroy to build the Sargood Centre, a transitional accommodation respite facility, and a ground-breaking ceremony was held in 2007. The Centre is expected to be open by 2011.

SCI Australia now has membership throughout Australia and is highly respected by all levels of government and the community alike.