



PRIME MINISTER

11 February 2000

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER

THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP

OPENING OF CHILD DEAFNESS RESEARCH LABORATORIES

THE ROYAL VICTORIAN EYE AND EAR HOSPITAL

EAST MELBOURNE

E&OE.....

Thank you very much Professor Gilbert. To Professor Clarke and all the other very distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I am particularly happy to be here this morning. I am, of course, very conscious of the extraordinary worldwide success of cochlear and bionic ear and just what an extraordinary contribution this great project has made to putting Australia on the map. And of carrying our scientific achievement to the rest of the world and demonstrating just what can be achieved if you have an effective partnership between the Government, the universities, our medical practitioners and scientists and the business sector.

In many ways it's a template for what ought to be achieved in other fields in the future. It drives home to all of us that we each have a role. It certainly drives home to me and I have had driven home to me on a number of occasions that the Government has a very important role in medical research in this country. I know, of course, people would quite properly say including many here, not just medical research, but all other forms of research in this country. But I am very happy to say that in the area of medical research we have not been unresponsive not only in relation to this project but also more generally with the commitment we made in the Budget last year to double our financial support for that in the years ahead.

I am also very conscious that this opening takes place here in Melbourne and Melbourne has a great, indeed enviable tradition of really being the home of family and corporate medical philanthropy in Australia. There's no city in the world for its size I think that has done better in terms of supporting

medical institutes and it's a tribute to the sense of community of the people of Melbourne especially that they have been so generous.

I have a particular interest in this project. Whilst I am happy to say that I was never afflicted in the way that so many that have been helped here were, hearing impairment is something that affected me as a child and as a young person. And I can well remember my teenage years wearing one of those then not so invisible hearing aids and I wondered at the time of the extraordinary difficulty and challenge in life of children who are born profoundly deaf or for some other combination of reasons such as meningitis or otherwise and that was the very familiar childhood affliction and disease that caused the total or near total deafness. And I have watched with more than just a passing interest and having had the acquaintance over the years of some of the more eminent surgeons in this area who have made such a contribution to improving the enjoyment of life of so many Australians.

And nothing quite touches any of us as a physical affliction of a child. Profound deafness or blindness or disability is something that all of us melt in compassion and sympathy before. And to see the delight on the face of a child whether you meet that child or you see that child on film or television who's had hearing restored or hearing given or sight improved is something that really makes life worth living. It makes science worth the dedication and the application and it makes whatever support financially and otherwise that the private sector and governments around the place can give absolutely worthwhile.

We have remarkable researchers in this country and it's very appropriate, may I say, that this opening occurs at the time of the Innovation Summit here in Melbourne because what that Summit is doing is to remind all of us of the linkages that I mentioned earlier, to remind all of us that this is going to be an area where Australia can continue to punch above her weight in the 21st century. We are very good at this and we should understand how good we are. We should honour the contribution of so many people in the past, honour the contribution of people to this institute. And to Dr Clarke and to so many others I'm filled with admiration and I'm also filled with admiration for the young researchers and scientists that I met a few moments ago. And I know that I'll have the opportunity to meet some of the people who have been the recipients of this marvellous hill scaled as far as medical science in Australia is concerned.

I want to assure you of my on going commitment and that of the Government. I want to compliment Cochlear. I want to congratulate all of those who've been involved in supporting the institute, and all of those associated with the University of Melbourne – it's vice-chancellor, it's previous vice-chancellors, and all of those who have made such an enormous contribution to something that makes me as Australia's current Prime Minister immensely proud of just how much we have achieved in this area. We have a capacity because of the kind of society we are to do even better in this area. We have brains and professional application the equal if not the better of any in the world. We have a business community that is increasingly aware of the constructive role that it can play. We have leadership on a vice-chancellor level in many of our universities now recognising that nobody operates alone any more, that you have to have linkages between universities and the private sector. And we also, can I assure you, have a Government that places an extremely high priority on this kind of activity. And most importantly of all as Australians I think we all have an immense personal commitment and sense of excitement about doing something that improves the quality of lives of young Australians in particular, and generally pushes forward the boundaries of medical science.

It's frequently been said that the last 25 years of the last century were very much the information technology quarter of the century. I think it's also fair to say that the heights that are going to be scaled in the area of medical research and medical science in the first 25 years of the 21st century will leave people

in the year 2050 gasping in amazement about what we've achieved because I think we all know, and I am a total layman and a real struggler in terms of trying to understand the complexities of medical science, but there is a sense that I think all of us have that we have achieved a great deal and we are reaching as Dr Clarke said to me a few moments ago some of the last frontiers in certain areas of medical science and research. It's a very exciting time to be involved and the thing that we should be immensely proud of is that Australia is right up at the front of it and medical research and activity here in Melbourne is right at the top of the Australian effort. And that gives a special sense to this occasion and gives me a very particular pleasure to be associated with the opening of the institute. Thank you.

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