



Ralph Hampson, Felicity McMahon, David Brabham

Starlight Children's Foundation, VIC

Abstract

Since 2006 the Starlight Children's Foundation (Starlight) has provided programs in the Northern Territory. This paper will explore how the program started, how it has expanded and developed and the opportunities for future service delivery in partnership with Aboriginal communities, NT government and health organisations.

The program involves Captain Starlight working alongside health professionals providing distraction through activities including art, music, story-telling, comedy and games - alleviating boredom and supporting children in both inpatient, outpatient and remote communities.

There have been many lessons learnt as the program has developed and we will share these experiences focusing on the development of our:

- Community Outreach Program - Captain Starlight also performs shows and leads activities that help to deliver key healthy living messages such as washing your hands and face, brushing your teeth, keeping your community clean, and developing healthy eating habits.
- Health Education – development of shows that incorporate health education messages focusing on nutrition, exercise, nose blowing, ear cleaning, washing hands, tooth brushing and mental health.
- Healthy School Aged Screening (HSAK) – Captain Starlight accompanies health professionals to attend paediatric clinics in remote areas of the NT.
- Attendance at Paediatric Multidisciplinary Clinics

The key areas we will explore are how we have established partnerships with Aboriginal communities; the factors that have allowed the programs to flourish; and how we are planning for future developments in this area.

Introduction

For over 25 years Starlight has been brightening the lives of seriously and chronically ill children, young people and their families via a range of innovative hospital and outreach programs focusing on positive distraction and entertainment. An essential element of Starlight's programs is Captain Starlight. These are professional costumed performers and artists who seek to distract and entertain young people while hospitalised and undergoing treatment or consultations. The impacts of the program include a reduction in young people's anxiety with hospitalisation and treatment or consultations, enhanced coping, a reframing of the children's/young peoples' experience of the medical system, and improved mood⁷.

In 2006 Starlight introduced the Captain Starlight program to the Northern Territory to improve the well-being of children and young people by enhancing the primary health care experience and encouraging healthy living through entertainment and play⁷. Based in Darwin, Starlight programs are provided in hospital and to communities through an outreach program, the program is provided five days per week at the Royal Darwin Hospital as well as to community outreach clinics to rural and remote communities across the Northern Territory.

Background

The health of Aboriginal Australians has consistently been found to be worse than that of other Australians. In the Northern Territory (NT) the difference is particularly pronounced with Aboriginal children having some of the highest levels of preventable chronic diseases in Australia and the world.^{1,2} Limited resources, a delay in services, and a mistrust of the mainstream health care system can contribute to low attendance rates at health clinics.³ Investing in effective, and culturally

appropriate, resources and services to improve Aboriginal maternal and childhood health results in long-term benefits to the child and community. Starlight working in partnership with Aboriginal communities and health professionals, is playing a part in increasing access to health services.

The Children and Young People's Rights in Health Care Services Charter³ (2011) states that:

... [i]ndigenous children's and young people's rights in healthcare services are the same as for every child and young person, but specific actions are needed to address disparities in access to care (p.6).

Aboriginal communities can distrust the mainstream Australian hospital system due to their experience of the systematic removal of children from their families and communities⁴. Unfamiliar hospital behaviours and rituals, the extended time away from the home community without the support of their kinship structure, a perceived emotional neglect from, and poor communication with, health professionals may contribute to many individuals experiencing disempowerment adding to the distress experienced by ATSI peoples utilising urban and regional hospital services⁵. Healthcare services for Aboriginal children and young people need to understand Aboriginal knowledge systems and incorporate them into their planning as well as building strong relationships with key Aboriginal leaders to develop a platform for culturally safe practices⁶.

In developing Starlight's programs the World Health Organisation's (WHO) definition of 'health promotion' guides and supports program development:

Health promotion is the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health. To reach a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, an individual or group must be able to identify and to realize aspirations, to satisfy needs, and to change or cope with the environment. Health is, therefore, seen as a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living. Health is a positive concept emphasizing social and personal resources, as well as physical capacities. Therefore, health promotion is not just the responsibility of the health sector, but goes beyond healthy life-styles to well-being⁶.

Captain Starlight Program—outreach services in the NT

Health promotion

The key objectives of Starlight's outreach program are:

- attracting children, young people, and families to health and child community centres and clinics
- increasing attendance by reducing fear and boredom
- supporting health promotion
- Increasing awareness of healthy living practices.

Working closely with local Aboriginal communities and health professionals Starlight has integrated the Captain Starlight program into already established health and community services in the NT. This work with Aboriginal communities has and is improving access to health services by building effective partnerships with health clinics, schools, children, families, and partnerships with primary health services (nurses, paediatricians and allied health professionals).

The program is designed to be safe, fun, engaging, and culturally sensitive. The development of shows (performed by Captain Starlight) that incorporate health education messages focusing on nutrition, exercise, nose blowing, ear cleaning, washing hands, and tooth brushing are central to the program. In creating these products Starlight worked with health promotion experts to develop materials that would work with Aboriginal communities.

The Outreach Program—reach and program components

Starlight NT Community Outreach program is also dependent on key collaborations with the following organisations: Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal Controlled Health Services, NT Department of Health and the NT Department of Education.

In 2013 the program reached 4500 children and young people from across 35 remote communities within the Northern Territory and the Starlight team travelled over 60,000 kilometres on planes, cars and ferries. The programs provided by Captain Starlight encouraged families to attend the clinics, reduced fears and anxieties, and supported families and children waiting to see the health team.

Since 2006 Starlight has worked with a range of communities in the NT including:

- East Arnhem Region: Yirrkala, Milingimbi, Gapuwiyak, Angurugu, Numbulwar, Ramingining, Galiwinku, Minjilang and Warruwi;
- Darwin Rural: Maningrida, Gunbalanya, Peppimenarti, Wadeye;
- Katherine Region: Katherine, Borroloola, Mataranka, Kalkarindji, Lajamanu and Pine Creek;
- Tiwi Islands Region: Milikapiti and Nguui;
- Central Australia Region: Alice Springs.

Starlight currently provides four main types of Outreach:

- Regular scheduled trips currently to Katherine and Nhulunbuy
- Remote Community 'Fly In' Paediatrics Clinics (new to the 2013 program)
- Healthy School Aged Kids Screening
- Public Program in support of local Community initiatives and Healthy Living events. The outreach program in 2013 visited pre-schools and schools as well as health clinics to provide health promotion shows and messaging in collaboration with the Northern Territory Health Department.

Each of these programs are outlined in more detail below:

Monthly trips—Nhulunbuy and Katherine

The Katherine Region's monthly visits include trips to the Hospital, Kintore Special School and Wurli-Wurlu Health Clinics. The local health services are very collaborative and supportive of the program. Starlight has participated in Katherine Youth Week and celebrated the Christmas season with a community Christmas party.

Starlight visits Nhulunbuy and the surrounding areas of Yirrkala, Ski and Wallaby Beach on a monthly basis. Starlight visits Gove district hospital and supports local health clinics and initiatives, regularly attending the young mothers and babies groups in Ski and Wallaby Beach providing play group activities and early year's health promotion. Starlight has also supported the local community to celebrate NAIDOC week, Healthy Kids week, and GARMA festival and community Christmas Parties.

Paediatric Clinics

Captain Starlight accompanies health professionals to attend Paediatric Multidisciplinary Clinics which focus on 0-5 year olds in remote parts of the NT. This program commenced in February 2013 with Starlight visiting remote communities with the visiting Community Paediatricians on their fly-in and fly-out day trips. This program has been very popular with communities and medical teams and the collaboration has expanded over the past 2 years. The comments below illustrate the strengths of the program:

"The Captain Starlight Program not only brings joy to the children attending the paediatric visits, but assists the visits to run more efficiently. The presence of the Captains maintains children waiting for their visit and decreases the temptation to leave, as they are entertained".
Dr Keith N. Edwards. FRACP Community Paediatrician

"The Starlight Captains were delightful, absolutely captivating...The children loved the program and the presenters...there was laughter and joy displayed by both the Captains and the kids.... It kept the kids contained, and easy to collect for their checks." Child Health Nurse

Healthy School Aged Kids Screening

In 2013 Starlight attended the GARMA Festival in collaboration with Miwatj Health Corporation, to provide assistance with health screening and also deliver a healthy lifestyle program for children aged 0 – 6 years. Starlight was able to attend workshops, network with people living and working within remote communities and also experience and learn more about Yolŋu culture.

Starlight has regularly attended the Angurugu HSAK. A highlight of the 2013 visit included visiting a young girl and her family who had spent 12 months in and out of hospital in 2012. When she returned home after her Starlight wish (Wishgranting program) she was able to introduce her extended community to Captain Starlight during the clinic visit.

“We would like to thank you for attending the Angurugu school screening. This event was very successful with more children being screened this year than in recent years. The entertainment and goodwill provided by the captains made this potentially unpleasant event enjoyable for the children. They were professional, talented and a delight to work with”. Laura Kelly – Child Health Nurse

These programs have and are continuing to be developed in consultation with Aboriginal communities.

Building on a strong foundation—research and evaluation

An independent external evaluation of the outreach program was undertaken in 2008 by the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health (predecessor to the Lowitja Institute). This evaluation found that Captain Starlight was well accepted and that the program filled a gap in the provision of entertainment and play activities in Aboriginal communities⁹.

The evaluation found that health professionals reported that the presence of Captain Starlight:

- improved attendance at clinics
- resulted in parents and children staying longer at clinics leading to an increase in the number consultation rates for mothers and children
- facilitated easier management of clinics
- created a less institutionalised more welcoming family-centred environment
- provided activities were greatly enjoyed
- was central to supporting existing health promotion programs.

The findings from the evaluation found that Captain Starlight was regarded as highly skilled, professional, self-sufficient, and non-intrusive; appreciated for their willingness and flexibility in providing support to community initiated activities; and that, the activities conducted by the Captains are greatly enjoyed and provide important play activities to children and communities that have little access to such entertainment.

Feedback from health professionals and internal evaluations of the program continue to support the CRCAH's findings, with significant increases in the number of Aboriginal children attending health clinics and screening programs being reported when Captain Starlight is present at the clinics and health centres.

“Captain Starlight has been an awesome asset during HSAK (Healthy School-Age Kids Program) rising from 50% of the children being screened in the community in 2011 to 80% in 2012. I truly believe this significant rise is from the influence of the Captain Starlight program.”
— Remote Child Health Nurse

Starlight has also produced the Research and Evaluation snapshot titled “Have cape, will travel” which summarises this report which is available from Starlight’s webpage (www.starlight.org.au).

Future plans

The Evaluation Report also made several recommendations, including, the promotion of, and continuation of regular visits to hospitals and centres; building the Captain Starlight Program into school, preschool, and child care health promotion programs; expanding Captain Starlight visits to additional communities; and, the recruitment of indigenous Captain Starlights. Starlight has implemented several of these recommendations.

Continuation of regular visits to hospitals and centres

Starlight has significantly expanded its NT Captain Starlight program through increasing hospital visits and being active at numerous rural and remote community health centres, at Healthy School-Aged Kids screening clinics, and health and community events and festivals. In addition, the program is being piloted, in collaboration with the NT Government, at Paediatric Multidisciplinary Clinics.

Starlight continues to strengthen its commitment to improving the well-being of Aboriginal children, young people and families through supporting Captain Starlight's attendance on paediatric day trips to community and Healthy School-Aged Screening visits; by continuing to develop collaborations with health professionals at a community and state level, engaging 'whole communities' at local festival and events, and by continuing to ensure the programs' future sustainability.

Key factors supporting the expansion of Starlight's NT outreach program are the need for preventative education; effective collaboration; long term program sustainability; and playing a part in addressing a critical need in Aboriginal communities.

Recruitment Captain Starlight

The recruitment for Captain Starlights to work in the NT has been addressed following the recommendations of the 2008 Evaluation Report. In 2014 Starlight embarked on a project to develop and establish a recruitment strategy for the Captain Starlight Program in the NT. This project included the development of a video that showcases the role of Captain Starlight in the Northern Territory, the opportunities within the Top End and the impact of our Program in remote communities.

The NT Recruitment Video was officially launched in October 2014 and has been viewed over 1,660 times, generating interest amongst the national performing arts community. As a result Starlight received over 80 applications for the role of Captain Starlight and have successfully recruited several new Captains, which means Starlight can deliver programs to more children and young people including visiting a larger number of remote communities.

Expanding Captain Starlight visits to additional communities—the Earbus Program

Studies have identified that 40% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children acquire middle ear disease almost immediately after birth. One in three children has a perforated eardrum before the age of two. Poor middle ear health can seriously affect children and has implications for speech and language development as well as overall wellness. It can be a significant barrier to successful schooling as children who don't hear well, don't learn. Undiagnosed ear problems can lead to permanent hearing loss¹⁰.

Based on the success of the NT Outreach Programs Starlight has worked with The Earbus Foundation of WA (Earbus) to integrate the Captain Starlight program into its service model.

Earbus operates a program of mobile children's ear health clinics in the Goldfields and East Pilbara regions of Western Australia (WA). The program aims to detect, diagnose and treat Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with ear health concerns, delivering a mobile service to this at-risk group of children who traditionally have had limited access to health services. Mobile clinics travel to rural and remote communities as part of a multidisciplinary ear health team and operates in collaboration with the WA Department of Education, Health Department, schools, playgroups, kindergartens and existing service providers to fill any gaps in ear health service¹¹.

In March 2015 Captain Starlight made their first trip with Earbus, and spending a week visiting Aboriginal communities in WA. After this first trip Starlight and Earbus will work together to learn more

about the needs, and how Captain Starlight can distract and entertain the kids while they wait for examinations, and to encourage them to come back for follow ups. Starlight will attend 4 trips to both the Pilbara and Goldfields region throughout the year starting with trips in March 2015.

Reporting on the first visit Emma Cahill, the manager of Captain Starlight program in WA made the following observations:

We had a fantastic day out at Yandeyarra community today. It is about an hour and a half out of Port Hedland and we had to drive across 3 rivers to get there - we even saw wild brumbys! The kids were absolutely divine and they responded so well to the Captains. The Captains did a fabulous job and spent some great quality time with the children while they waited for their turn with the audiologists. The little kids loved playing finger puppets and blowing bubbles, the older kids were absolutely gobsmacked by magic and everyone loved drawing! There was a dance party at recess and the little kids were cranking on the dance floor.

The staff at the school all independently told the Earbus crew what a great job the Captains did, which was lovely to hear. Paul Higginbotham, the Earbus CEO, said that the Captains had already made a difference and that the kids were more engaged and more relaxed, and that the efficiency was far greater with having the Captains around to collect kids from class, entertain them while waiting, etc.

Research and evaluation

In the future Starlight plans to undertake further research to investigate whether the NT Captain Starlight program changes health behaviours and to understand more about the 'dose' and the timing of the exposure if it does contribute to behaviour change.

Conclusion

With a permanent and respected presence in the NT, the Captain Starlight Outreach Program continues to be promoted and recommended by numerous health agencies. Starlight continues to work in partnerships with indigenous communities, health professionals and funders to expand, develop and evaluate its outreach programs which are making a difference in supporting better health outcomes for Aboriginal children and their families in remote parts of Australia.

References

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Ear and hearing health of Indigenous children in the Northern Territory. [Online] Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; 2011. [Cited 04 March 2013]. Available from URL: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publication-detail/?id=10737420423>
2. The Lowitja Institute. Child and Maternal Health. [Online] Melbourne: The Lowitja Institute. [Cited 04 March 2013]. Available from URL: <http://www.lowitja.org.au/research-topics/childand-maternal-health>
3. Children and Young People's Rights in Health Care Services [Charter] (2011). Retrieved April 16, 2014 from <http://children.wcha.asn.au/children-and-young-peoples-rights-healthcare-services-charter>
4. DiGiacomo M, Davidson PM, Abbott P, et al. Childhood disability in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: a literature review. *International Journal for Equity in Health* 2013, 12:7: doi:10.1186/1475-9276-12-7 Clarke, A., Andrews, S., & Austin, N. (2000). *Lookin' After Our Own*. Aboriginal Family Support Unit: Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne.
5. Tanner, I., Agius, K., & Darbyshire, P. (2004). 'Sometime they run away, that's how scared they feel': The paediatric hospitalisation experiences of Indigenous families from a remote area of Australia. *Contemporary Nurse*, 18, 3-17.
6. Booth, J., & Nelson, A. (2013). Sharing stories: Using narratives to illustrate the role of critical reflection in practice with First Australians. *Occupational Therapy International*, 20(3), 114-123. doi:10.1002/oti.1343

7. Kelly-Dalgety E. Captain Starlight Program Evaluation Report 2010. Melbourne: Starlight Children's Foundation, 2010.
8. WHO (2009) Milestones in health promotion: Statements from global conferences. World Health Organization 2009 Accessed on line 01 April 2015
<http://www.who.int/healthpromotion/en/>
9. Harrison N, Walker D. Evaluation of the Starlight Children's Foundation activities in regional and remote communities of the Northern Territory. Darwin: Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2008
10. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015. Hearing health outreach services to Indigenous children and young people in the Northern Territory: 2012–13 and 2013–14. Cat. no. IHW 149. Canberra: AIHW.
11. The Earbus Foundation of WA . Available at: <http://www.healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/key-resources/programs-projects?pid=2172> Accessed 01 April, 2015

Presenter

Dr Ralph Hampson is the Head, Research and Evaluation at the Starlight Children's Foundation. He has more than 30 years' experience in health and community services and is an experienced clinician, supervisor, manager, policy maker, evaluator, researcher and academic. In his role at Starlight he is responsible for undertaking and developing evaluations and research projects in partnership with the National Starlight team.