Introduction
The health of Indigenous 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. When left undiagnosed and untreated these conditions can lead to long-term negative physical, cognitive, psychosocial, and vocational outcomes for the children. Limited resources, a delay in services, and a mistrust of the mainstream health care system can contribute to low attendance rates at health clinics. 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.1,2

Background
Since 1988 the Starlight Children’s Foundation has been brightening the lives of seriously and chronically ill children, young people and their families via a range of innovative hospital activities, e.g. skits, songs, and interactive entertainment and play. Captain Starlight works alongside local and visiting health professionals to encourage attendance, alleviate fear and boredom, and deliver health messages to children, young people and families attending health clinics and health services in local community settings such as schools and festivals. The Captains’ activities support the reduction of chronic childhood diseases in the communities.

“The Starlight Captains were delightful, absolutely captivating…The children loved the program and the presenters…their laugh 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

In 2006 CSCOP has expanded its services and is now active at numerous rural and remote community health centres, at Healthy School Aged Kids screening clinics, and community event festivals, and is being piloted, in collaboration with the NT Government, at Paediatric Multidisciplinary Clinics. CSCOP is, or has been active, in:

- East Arnhem Region: Yirrkala, Milingimbi, Gapuwiyak, Anguruku, Numbraluk, Raminginng, Galwinku, Minjilang and Warruwi
- Darwin Rural: Milingirlinga, Gunbalanya, Jawar in the Pine Creek
- Katherine Region: Katherine, Borroloola, Mataranka, Kalkaringi, Lajamanu and Pine Creek
- Tiwi Islands Region: Milikapiti and Nguiu
- Central Australia Region: Alice Springs. In 2008 Starlight engaged the services the CSCOP to create and launch the Captain Starlight Community Outreach Program (CSCOP) to address the issue of young peoples’ experience of the medical system, and improve their experience of the medical system, and improved mood.3

The Program
Using activities such art, music, story-telling, comedy and games, Captain Starlight performs shows and leads activities that help deliver healthy living messages such as the importance of:

- Washing hands and face
- Cleaning ears, brushing teeth
- Keeping the community clean
- Developing healthy eating habits

The CSCOP is promoted through multiple channels with recommendations frequently made by health agencies. Since 2006 CSCOP has expanded its services and is now active at numerous rural and remote community health centres, at Healthy School Aged Kids screening clinics, and community event festivals, and is being piloted, in collaboration with the NT Government, at Paediatric Multidisciplinary Clinics. CSCOP is, or has been active, in:

- East Arnhem Region: Yirrkala, Milingimbi, Gapuwiyak, Anguruku, Numbraluk, Raminginng, Galwinku, Minjilang and Warruwi
- Darwin Rural: Milingirlinga, Gunbalanya, Jawar in the Pine Creek
- Katherine Region: Katherine, Borroloola, Mataranka, Kalkaringi, Lajamanu and Pine Creek
- Tiwi Islands Region: Milikapiti and Nguiu
- Central Australia Region: Alice Springs.

Using play and entertainment Captain Starlight performs shows and leads activities that help deliver healthy living messages such as the importance of:

- Washing hands and face
- Cleaning ears, brushing teeth
- Keeping the community clean
- Developing healthy eating habits

Program evaluation
In 2008 Starlight engaged the services the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health (CRCAB) — predecessor to the Lowitja Institute — to evaluate the impact of Captain Starlight’s activities in the NT.

What was learned?
The findings from the evaluation found that the Captains are:

- 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.

In addition, a number of positive impacts were identified by the health staff responsible for children’s clinics. They included:

- improved attendance at clinics
- parents and children staying longer at clinics easier management of clinics
- the creation of a less institutionalised more welcoming family-centred environment, and that
- Captain Starlight was pivotal to supporting existing health promotion programs.

Continuing feedback from clinic health professionals and internal evaluations of the CSCOP continue to support the CRCAB’s findings.

“Captain Starlight has been an awesome asset during HS4K (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

Key factors supporting the expansion of Starlight’s NT outreach program:

- Preventative education
- Collaboration
- Sustainability
- Addressing a critical need in indigenous communities

Future directions/Ongoing work
In 2013 Starlight will continue to:

Strengthen its links with NT Health through supporting Captain Starlight’s attendance on pediatric day trips to community and Healthy School Aged Screening visits.

Explore and develop methods to formally measure the impact of Starlight’s NT Community Outreach program.

References

Laura Robinson Starlight Children’s Foundation