Evaluation of the Starlight Children’s Foundation’s activities in regional and remote communities in the Northern Territory

Nea Harrison and Diane Walker

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Introduction

Background to the Northern Territory Starlight Children’s Foundation Program

The Starlight Children’s Foundation has been active in the Northern Territory since September 2006. The focus of the Program in the Northern Territory has been the introduction of Darwin based Captain Starlights who regularly visit the children at the hospitals and clinics. Captain Starlight has been visiting the NT from other centres in Australian since 2006.

The Starlight Children’s Foundation established an Office in Darwin in 2007 staffed by a Northern Territory Program Manager and an Administration / Officer Manager. At the time of the evaluation there were three Darwin based Captains, two permanent and one casual.

NT activities have included Captain Starlight visiting the Royal Darwin, Gove and Alice Springs hospitals; and visiting the children’s clinic at Yirrkala and the paediatric clinic at Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress). As part of the remote and regional community visits the Captain Starlight periodically visits the schools and child care centres.

Purpose of the evaluation

The Starlight Children’s Foundation contracted the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health (CRCAH) to evaluate the Captain Starlight Program conducted in regional and remote communities of the Northern Territory. The Foundation seeks to determine the acceptability of the Captain Starlight ‘brand’ in the NT; the impact of the Captain Starlight activities; and obtain suggestions for how the Captain Starlight activities can be improved to be more relevant and / or effective in remote and regional community settings.

The evaluation aims to provide the Starlight Children’s Foundation with information that may be used to guide future planning for the Foundation’s activities in the NT.

Focus of the evaluation

The focus of the evaluation is on the Captain Starlight activities undertaken in regional and remote communities of the Northern Territory. The activities undertaken include entertainment, distraction therapy and health promotion messages. The primary focus of the evaluation is the activities conducted at Yirrkala community and Central Australian Aboriginal Congress.
As a result of discussions between the Starlight Children’s Foundation and the CRCAH Evaluators in the planning stages of the evaluation, it was agreed to include the Royal Darwin, Gove and Alice Springs Hospitals. Their inclusion in the evaluation enables comparisons to be made between community health centre and hospital activities and provides a richer picture of the Captain Starlight activities in the NT.

The key questions asked in the evaluation included:

**Acceptability**
- To what extent do people recognise the Captain Starlight brand?
- How well is Captain Starlight received by the community?

**Impact**
- Has the Starlight foundation improved attendance at clinics?
- What are the impacts of Captain Starlight as entertainment?
- What are the impacts of the health promotion messages?
- Does Captain Starlight benefit / make a difference to the work of the health staff?

**Suggestions for improvement**
- How could the Captain Starlight activities be improved to be more relevant or effective?
- How often should Captain Starlight visit?

Captain Starlight entertains visitors at Gove Hospital
Methodology

Qualitative data collection and analysis

Document analysis
A number of documents were reviewed including the Starlight Children’s Foundation brochures, background information sheets and the Starlight Children’s Foundation Website. These provided information about the history and context of the current Program.

Interviews
The Evaluators organised site visits to each of the locations that Captain Starlight visits. The Evaluators conducted semi-structured interviews with a range of health service staff in community health centres, hospitals and child care centres in Darwin, Gove, Yirrkala and Alice Springs. In depth interviews were also held with each of the Captains. Opportunistic interviews and discussions were also conducted with child care centre, school and preschool staff, parents and community members during the site visits. The interviews were tailored to respondents’ experiences with the Program with questions being drawn from a questionnaire sent to the health centres prior to the interview. With interviewees’ permission, the Evaluators taped the interviews for transcription. These data were organised into agreed categories and emerging themes were identified. Opportunistic discussions with families or support people where recorded in a notebook.

Observation
The Evaluators accompanied the Captains to their performances in Yirrkala, Gove and Alice Springs. Observation of the Captains performances, activities and interaction with the children and their families were undertaken during these visits. Photos were taken of the group activities held in the community health centres. The evaluators sought out parents or carers to gain permission for photos and to explain the purpose of the visit. The evaluators sent copies of all photos taken back to the health and child care centres for display and distribution.

Ongoing feedback for program development
This was a formative evaluation. Evaluators regularly fed back findings and observations from the field visits to the Captains and their managers. This feedback provided opportunities for clarification, discussion and Program improvement prior to the end of the evaluation.

Limitations of the evaluation design
The nature of the interaction with parents in the community health settings involved observing the children being entertained and speaking with, not formally interviewing parents. The evaluators had general conversations with parents regarding the acceptability of the Captain Starlight character and activities. At Yirrkala, English was not the first language for some of the parents and the evaluators did not have access to an interpreter, however
informal discussions were held. In addition, the Evaluators were able to gain detailed feedback from a number of Indigenous people including the School Liaison Officer who brought children to the clinic and an Aboriginal Health Worker.

In the hospital setting the evaluators observed the interaction between Captain Starlight and the Children. The evaluators had intended to speak to parents but that proved both inappropriate and impractical. There were few parents in attendance and they were caring for distressed or very ill children. In these circumstances, the Starlight activity was brief and it was considered to be an intrusion to remain behind and question parents.

**Strengths of the evaluation design**

The evaluation design was flexible and allowed for the evaluators to adapt to the circumstances and the location.

Children at Congress Child Care singing Dingle Dangle Scarecrow
Captain Starlight’s work in the Northern Territory

Yirrkala Community Health Centre

Yirrkala is an Aboriginal community with a population of 980 people located 18 kms southwest of Nhulunbuy Township in the Gove Peninsular in Arnhem Land. Yirrkala has a Community Health Centre, run by the Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services which conducts fortnightly Well Children’s Clinics. Sick children are transferred to the nearby Gove Hospital or to the Royal Darwin Hospital.

Yirrkala Health Centre runs a ‘Healthy Kids Club’ clinic every Wednesday morning and two Captains travel to Yirrkala every second Wednesday to entertain the children at the ‘Kids’ Clinic. The Captains entertain the children on a shaded verandah outside the health centre. The Health Centre provides sandwiches, fruit, vegetables and juice to parents and children in the air conditioned waiting area next to the verandah. Captain Starlight has been visiting the Yirrkala Community Health Centre regularly since 2006.

On the day the Evaluators visited, the Captains entertained the children with face painting, and magic tricks. The Captains spent three hours entertaining around 20 children who were waiting for their turn at the clinic. A number of parents and carers watched the activities and were enjoying the activities.

The Captain Starlight Program has been working with Yirrkala Community Health Centre staff to trial promoting health and hygiene through half hour shows dedicated to fun and education activities focusing on nose blowing, using the bin to stop the spread of germs, ear cleaning, measuring height and weight and washing hands.\(^1\)

In 2007 Captain Starlight was invited to participate in the Yirrkala School and Preschool Christmas concert and earlier in the year supported an immunisation program conducted by the health centre in conjunction with the school.

Gove Hospital

Gove Hospital is based in the Nhulunbuy Township, which has a population of 3700 people. The hospital services the people of the town (predominately employees and families of the Nabalco Bauxite Mine, government departments and service providers) as well as the surrounding Aboriginal communities the largest of which is Yirrkala. Gove is located 645 kilometres from Darwin with access by road and air in the dry season and air only in the wet season.

\(^1\) Starlight Foundation, NT Programs Summary 2007.
After spending the morning in Yirrkala, the Captains drive into Nhulunbuy to visit the Gove Hospital in the afternoon. The Captains visit sick children in their rooms, and entertain children in the corridors and in the outdoor areas of the hospital. The Captains generally spend around an hour visiting all of the children. On the day the Evaluators visited, the Captains made balloon animals for the children and performed magic tricks. Gove Hospital has a Starlight Activity Centre and Captain Starlight spent some time assisting staff and a sick child to operate it.

Central Australian Aboriginal Congress Alice Springs

Central Australian Aboriginal Congress is a community controlled organisation providing comprehensive primary health care services to Aboriginal people in and around Alice Springs. Alice Springs is a city of 24,000 people, located approximately 1300 kilometres south of Darwin.

Congress Health Service holds a paediatric clinic on the first Wednesday morning of each month. Captain Starlight has been attending these clinics since 2006. Two Captains travel to Alice Springs once a month to entertain children on a shaded verandah area outside the Health Service. Family members wait either inside in the air conditioned waiting room or outside on the verandah area. Small groups of children are entertained by the Captains while waiting for their appointments or while waiting for transport home. The Captains sing songs with the children, aided by a ukulele and puppets, perform magic tricks and paint faces and hands.

The day the Evaluator visited, the Captains entertained the children from 9 am until 11 am and then went to the Congress Child Care Centre, located on the same campus, to put on a concert for the children.

Congress first contacted the Starlight Children’s Foundation in 2006 to discuss working with the Aboriginal organisation. Two activities resulted from the initial meeting; the monthly visits to the Paediatric Clinic and a community family day that was held in August 2006. The Captains performed and the Starlight Foundation arranged a variety of acts from Alice Springs. *It was a good fun family day which was great* (Clinic Coordinator).

In addition the Starlight Children’s Foundation provides Congress with toys and books.

*They’ve also supported us with toys, books; really any time we’ve called asking for resources like that they’ve been really generous in supplying those things for us* (Clinic Coordinator).

Alice Springs Hospital

The Captains visit the Alice Springs Hospital children’s ward in the afternoons after they have been to Congress. Reports from the hospital staff indicate that the Captains
do not visit the hospital regularly. The Captains visit sick children in their rooms and seek out children in the corridors and the outdoor areas of the hospital to entertain them. The Captains generally spend around an hour and a half visiting all of the children. On the day the Evaluator visited, the Captains made balloon animals for the children and performed magic tricks.

**Royal Darwin Hospital**

Royal Darwin Hospital (RDH) is located in the Northern suburbs of Darwin, the capital city of the NT. Very sick children from remote and regional NT are sent to RDH and some stay for extended periods (from three to six months). Captain Starlight visits RDH three days per week and conducts a range of activities with the children. School and preschool age children at RDH attend the school room each day and the Captains visit in times that the children are not at school. Seventy to eighty per cent of the children in RDH are Indigenous.

The Captains entertain the very sick children in their rooms and conduct group activities in the Parents’ Room with children who are well enough to move about. The hospital prominently displays the art work created by the children with the Captains. Captain Starlight is the only regular entertainment on offer for children at the hospital. The hospital does not have access to play therapists.

Artwork created by Royal Darwin Hospital children and Captain Starlight
The Northern Territory is different

The children from remote and regional Northern Territory communities differ significantly from the children Captain Starlight works with in other areas of Australia. The Captains identified that the children and their parents are younger; the type of activities the children prefer are different; many different languages are spoken by children and their families; and Indigenous people feel shy with strangers.

And the kids up here are very different…. Down south a lot of the kids are into their computer games and the technology side of everything, whereas up here they really enjoy the one on one interaction, they like doing hands on activities. Regardless of how sick they are, they still really want to get involved in hands on activities, rather than sitting down in front of a computer playing a game or watching a movie, or anything like that.

Another big difference would be language, down south you can walk into any room and sort of know what to expect and know what and how you’re going to perform. Whereas here I find that you have to adjust yourself with every single patient. You really have to just work with the moment as well. I guess you learn how to communicate without words and just through body language and visuals. Especially with the Indigenous kids, it’s really important.

Another big difference with up here from compared to down south is that we find, we entertain a lot more younger kids and a lot more babies and I guess the reason why we entertain a lot of the babies is because the parents are so young, and the parents actually get a lot out of our visits. …And they really get into it, they get into the magic, the entertainment and I suppose it’s a nice sort of outlook for them as well.

At Yirrkala it took a long time for us to gain trust with it at the start. Now it’s absolutely beautiful, the whole community knows us and but it did take a while to gain that trust from the families and the kids.

The Captain Starlight activities conducted in the NT were reported to differ markedly from activities undertaken in southern states. Captain Starlight’s work in the NT involves group activities with children attending the paediatric and healthy children’s clinics in Alice Springs and Yirrkala and the spin off activities conducted with the schools and child care centres. The high prevalence of chronic disease faced by Aboriginal people necessitates a focus on keeping kids healthy and supporting healthy living practices.

In the hospitals, the Captain’s work is similar to the ‘traditional’ Captain Starlight activities conducted with sick children in other States, although the activities in NT hospital settings tend to be more focused on one-to-one interaction between the children and Captain Starlight.
One of the Captains interviewed who has experience working in the Northern Territory and in Victoria described how in hospitals ‘down south’ children have access to a wide range of diversional therapies and entertainment.

*I think the biggest difference that I’ve noticed since I’ve been up here, is that the kids up here really appreciate our visits because they don’t have all those other types of distractive therapies. Down south they have heaps of distractive therapies, music therapy, art therapy, and the clown doctors come in.*
Evaluation Findings

The Findings section is organised around the key questions examined by the evaluation: recognition and acceptability of the Captain Starlight Program, impact of the Program and suggestions for improvement to the Program activities in the Northern Territory.

Captain Starlight and kids at Congress Health Centre sing along
Recognition and Acceptability

The evaluation found that Captain Starlight was well recognised by staff, parents, and children at all the sites visited on a regular basis. The Captain Starlight characters and their costumes are well received and are seen to be appropriate to the target group. Interviewees reported that the Captains are highly skilled, professional in their interactions, self sufficient and non intrusive. The activities conducted by the Captains are fun and provide important play and health promotion input to children and communities that have little access to such entertainment.

The health service staff appreciate the willingness and flexibility of the Captain Starlight Program to work outside of their core business area and to provide support to community initiated activities.

Kids, parents and health staff recognise Captain Starlight

Captain Starlight is well recognised by children, parents and health staff.

_When I told the staff last week that they [Captain Starlight] were coming, they were all excited and said 'oh they're great, the kids love them’ (Director Congress Childcare)._ 

The Children’s delight at the Captain Starlight activities and performances was evident during the observation visits. The children were excited by the Captains, but comfortable in their presence. In the community health settings the Captains held the children’s attention for the whole time they were interacting with them. The costume was reported to be well received.

_Their clothing is fantastic, everybody recognises them, the kids here are the same as kids anywhere, they just love dress up and they recognise them immediately (Health Centre Manager)._ 

Captain Starlight provides much needed entertainment and play activities in Aboriginal communities

A number of people interviewed commented that Aboriginal children have limited access to organised entertainment and play opportunities. The Director of the Congress Child Care Centre reported:

_I think from any child's point of view and particularly for some of our Aboriginal children that are in foster care; having Captain Starlight is great because it gives them exposure to live theatre, live performances and things like that. And I think that bush kids probably really miss those sorts of experiences._

One of the health staff at Congress provided feedback that she was impressed with the play and stimulation incorporated into the activities conducted by the Captains. Although play is known to have good outcomes for children, it is not often incorporated in the health care setting.
… It’s good role modelling for nurses and doctors to see this kind of thing because play often gets left out of things. But we know it improves health.

She further commented on the children’s high level of engagement with the Captain Starlight activities.

There are some children who are quite shy, yet it seems like all the children here are actually involved today. I’m not seeing any children not getting involved.
Health Centres value that the Starlight Children’s Foundation is willing to work with them in a way that it outside its ‘core business’

The Starlight Children’s Foundation has shown a willingness to work flexibly with the communities in the NT. They have been prepared to become involved in a range of activities in and around the health centres, school and child care centres. The Congress Paediatric Clinic Coordinator described the negotiations that led to the Captain Starlight involvement with Congress.

*When we first started having conversations with Starlight about the possibility of them providing support to kids and families in Alice Springs, we recognised that their core business is really around terminally ill kids and families. So we had a bit of discussion around that because not many of the kids that we work with are terminally ill luckily. But the social circumstances are so difficult for families that we thought that the almost terminal lack of fun or enjoyment in some ways met those criteria. And you know, they were really positive about that even though it wasn’t their core business, they were really enthusiastic about getting in there and doing something with Aboriginal kids and their families regardless of illness or non-illness. So that was really positive. They’ve really basically said ‘well whatever you need, we’ll try and provide it’ and they’ve been a great support for that actually.*

Regular visits are highly valued

The importance of regular visits and the long term commitment the Starlight Children’s Foundation has made to Yirrkala and Congress cannot be overstated. The Yirrkala Health Centre Manager reported:

*[Captain Starlight] is one of the services that actually just turn up, do what they said and there’s no fuss about it, it’s just a fun little thing and it makes our running of this so much easier. And what we do is we just say [to families] the weeks that they’re not here ‘Oh Starlight will be here in a couple of weeks’ or ‘Starlight will be back’. So it’s sort of like an incentive to tell the mums to come back, and I honestly think that often they come down just to get the kids their balloons and stuff. I feel like that sometimes but I don't really care, because at the same time they’re coming in between just in case they’re here.*

A benefit of regular visits to Yirrkala is the opportunity to build relationships with people in the community. On the day the Evaluators visited, a teenage girl was helping the Captains with their work which she does regularly.

*[All of the Captains] that we’ve had seem to adjust fairly well and they’ve always been really genuine with what they do. We’ve got some older girls, some teenage girls, who have some disabilities and [the Captains] have been interacting with them on a regular basis when they’ve been here as well so they’ve got a bit of a bond which is nice (Health Centre Manager).*
The entertainment mix is appropriate

All of the health service and community workers interviewed were very happy with the entertainment mix provided by Captain Starlight. The entertainment was regarded as appropriate for the audience and the environment; whether it was health centre, hospital or child care centre. The group singing, music making, magic tricks worked well in the community health centre and hospital settings. The face painting kept the children entertained at the health centre. Interviewees reported that the children love the ‘hands on’ activities and love the ukulele and the singing.

*Music is important. It is very strong in Aboriginal culture* *(Health Worker).*

The three hospitals in the NT Captain Starlight Program have been provided with Starlight Activity Centres. The Evaluators asked health staff whether the children enjoyed the machines as much as the live performances. In Alice Springs hospital staff reported that the children “absolutely love the machines” although health staff think the personal contact is fantastic.

It was also reported that the machines break down quite a lot *although they tell me that we don't report them half as much as other hospitals which really surprised me.* *(Nurse)*

Captain Starlight and the boys at Yirrkala practice magic tricks
Captain Starlight supports health promotion programs through entertainment

Given the low level of knowledge about health and hygiene among many of the health services’ clients, the addition of health promotion songs into Captain Starlight’s repertoire was welcomed. The primary value of the health promotion messages in the Captain Starlight songs is in supporting and reinforcing the health promotion messages and activities conducted by the health centres, hospitals, childcare centres and schools.

*Just reinforcing those same messages that we’re talking to families about is great (Health service staff member)*.

The Ward Manager at RDH reported that the value of Captain Starlight is as entertainment and enjoyment for the children. Health promotion is the job of the health staff, who should be developing culturally appropriate health promotion activities. However, she was happy with the idea of Captain Starlight including some health promoting songs and activities to reinforce the health promotion messages given by hospital.

*I think their focus is entertainment and I think they do it well. I don’t think they need to [run health promotion programs]. Maybe they could [develop activities to encourage] blowing your nose and not putting things down your ears and all that sort of stuff …they could do that…. We just need to make it a bit brighter for [the children] and a less scary place. And they’re very, very colourful.*

As a unit we try and do a lot of different stuff with kids. We do things like in the winter months we have a barbeque for families where we have entertainment. We’re trying to make hospitals a really open and friendly place that the family are welcome and then put the health promotion messages into the entertainment. …The health department has got these new ads, ‘Have you washed your hands? No germs on me!’ If Captain Starlight picked up on something like that, that would be something that the kids would immediately relate to because they just love it. It’s just a fantastic health promotion, it’s real and it’s the catchy things that kids relate to. When we move back downstairs again, we will set up a dining room for the kids and then we can facilitate the hand washing message.

The Captain Starlights are self sufficient and trustworthy

All of the health centre and hospital staff interviewed provided feedback that the Captains are highly professional, trustworthy and self sufficient. The health staff felt confident to get on with their clinic or ward activities without the need to supervise the Captains.

*Their people contact is great, you know and it’s obvious these guys have good training on how to relate to kids.*

Captains feel that their contribution is valued

The Northern Territory Captains were very happy with their work and felt that their work was valued.
The kids really appreciate our visits because they don’t get that interaction with these sorts of therapies that you would get down south. Yeah it’s such a pleasure. It’s such a novelty for all the kids. Yeah cool, it’s a nice feeling, yeah it’s pretty special.

And some of the kids in hospital rarely get any visitors let alone someone who gives away balloons or something.

Yirrkala children with balloons and face decorations
**Impact**

A number of impacts were identified by health staff responsible for children’s clinics and wards. Fortnightly attendance at Yirrkala Healthy Kid’s Club clinic by Captain Starlight is seen to encourage parents to bring their children to the clinics regularly. In both Alice Springs and Yirrkala, parents and children are staying longer at the clinics making it easier for health staff to manage the clinics and Captain Starlight’s presence improves the environment at the health centres. The Captain Starlight’s involvement in health centre, school and child care health promotion programs has enhanced those programs.

**Impact on improved attendance at clinics**

The Yirrkala Health Centre Manager believes that the combination of weekly well children’s clinics and the attendance of Captain Starlight at every second clinic encourages parents to bring their children for regular checkups and has had an observable impact on the children’s health.

> [We see improvements] across the board like the children’s monitoring of their HBs and just the anaemia problems and things like that are much less than when we started a couple of years ago because we do have this regular checking and interface with the people. …all the mums know now that Wednesday morning is kids’ morning and we’re very precious about protecting it. We really do fiercely protect it because it has been the one thing that we can see we’ve actually made some progress on.

Yirrkala staff members reported that more children attend clinics on the days Captain Starlight visits. In Alice Springs, Congress staff were not able to link improved attendance with Captain Starlight visits because Congress provides a bus to collect children for their appointments and this is likely to have a significant impact on attendance.

**Impact of Captain Starlight as entertainment**

Health staff in the two community health services reported that parents and kids stay longer at the health centre during children’s clinics when Captain Starlight is entertaining the children.

> If the paediatricians are running a bit late which they can do, if families are a bit bored with the whole thing, they might leave and if the Captains are around, they tend to hang around because you know, the kids are entertained, they’re not wanting to be somewhere else. That is an impact that we tend to have families that turn up for appointments stay for them (Paediatric Clinic Coordinator).

Captain Starlight reported that they had received similar feedback during their visits.

> We have been told by the staff that since we’ve been going there the parents have been staying with their kids a lot longer. We were told ‘before there are no toys, there’s no reason for the kids to stay, it’s hot, there’s no air con’. So I think they were saying the parents were coming and because they weren’t getting seen for quite a long time they were leaving.
Whereas when we’re there they’ve got something to do. It becomes an enjoyable visit so to speak, something maybe to look forward to in coming into the clinic. And they did mention that since we’ve been coming, the parents have not only been staying for their appointments, they’ve been staying longer. So after their appointments they stay a little bit longer to make sure their, like their kids don’t miss out.

Kids try out the magic tricks at Congress Health Centre
Impact of Captain Starlight sharing health promotion messages

The involvement of Captain Starlight in Yirrkala health promotion and school screening activities in 2007 was reported to be a great success.

We did our school screening differently [last year] in that we did a lot of education before it. So rather than just have kids line up and get screened we tried to put lots of health promotion in and [the Captains] came up to the Preschool and to the School.

We sent [the Captains] to the [Health Department] building in Darwin to learn a bit about what they were doing. And they came back with these songs that they'd made up with little ukulele about ‘We get measured, we get weighed’ and all the rest of it – absolutely fantastic. And the thing was, when we did the Preschool screening, the kids were fighting over whose turn it was, and they were coming down the hallway singing what the Starlights had taught them. I can tell you that it had an effect.

So I think certainly that communication and the use of the song and having the Captains there makes a big difference in the education side of it as well. And it would be good to do that on a regular basis to make visits to the School and Preschool because certainly it went down well and it makes our job easier if the kids aren’t terrified (Health Centre Manager).

Impact on work of the health staff

Health staff all reported that Captain Starlight attendance makes the running of the clinics easier for them. Captain Starlight’s visits do not require preparation and the Captains do not require supervision. Staff do not have to worry about children and parents leaving before they have had their appointments, and the children tend to be more relaxed and less fearful when Captain Starlight is around

If you look at how that affects staff… you know where the kids are, you know where there families are because they’re usually at the front watching the Captains [and] that makes it easier to access them within the clinic. And they’re entertained, so I guess that’s a way that it does make it easier for me when I’m running the clinic (Clinic Manager).

The Captains presence in the health centre and hospital was reported to create a more welcoming environment and makes the centre feel less institutional and more family centred.

You know, it’s really fantastic that they’ve been prepared to do that and I think the families, they don’t talk about it necessarily, but, you can observe that the kids are having a good time and the parents are having a good time, and they’re really happy when the kids are participating in different things and they walk off with their balloon or whatever (Nurse).

Especially in the culture of the majority of our patients, they don’t have that same concentration on play, so they actually have to learn how to play. They’re [often] left to their own devices. So for us it’s really good for them to learn about play and to make hospital not a scary place. In Aboriginal eyes [hospital] was often seen as a bad place to go, there’s lot of history there (Children’s Ward Manager).
All health staff interviewed reported that the Captains are highly professional and self-sufficient, so staff do not need to prepare for them or to spend time monitoring the activities.

*They're self sufficient so you don't have to spend time [monitoring them]…. But we feel confident that Starlight are age appropriate and … confidentiality and all these issues aren't a concern with Starlight (Children’s Ward Manager).*

Activity on the verandah of Yirrkala Health Centre
Suggestions for improvement

The suggestions made for improving the Starlight Children’s Foundation Program in the NT fell into two categories; suggestions for improving its effectiveness in specific settings and suggestions for expanding the Program to enable other groups to benefit from the Captain Starlight entertainment and health promotion activities.

Improving the effectiveness of the Starlight Foundation’s current activities

Visit Regularly

The regularity or irregularity of the Captain Starlight visits is an important issue for the health centres and hospitals. Captain Starlight is most highly valued by the centres that they visit regularly. The Charge Nurse at RDH highlighted that because they visit regularly, Captains are able to develop good relationships with the longer term children. The large pieces of artwork developed by the children and the Captains over a number of weeks are very important to the children. Although the children’s ward often has visiting ‘celebrities’, particularly football heroes drop in; the Captains are their mainstay.

It’s regular and this is why this is important because it’s regular. Another thing too, we’ve had a few [Captains] that have stayed around a while like familiar faces, so you’re not getting a different team every month.

Alice Springs Hospital Children’s Ward Manager reported that Captain Starlight would be of greater benefit to them if they visited more and were regular so the hospital could include them in their planning.

So while they’re here they’re fantastic but you know, it’s a short visit every three months which is very valuable for the kids that are there but there’s nothing in between. So I guess that’s the thing, when I know the value of the whole Program in tertiary hospitals, with their Starlight rooms and the Starlight team onsite all the time. And I know that can’t happen here but I guess if they’re flying down here for a visit for about an hour to the ward and a visit to Congress, you know is that value? We certainly value when they’re here but when it’s only a short visit and my staff seem to believe it’s probably about every three months. [Staff] said when they first started they were more frequent and they thought there might have been some hiccups with staffing.

The Children’s Ward Manager noted that Alice Springs hospital has twice weekly visits from the Clown Doctors who as a result are able to get to know and develop relationships with the children.

The value of the Clown Doctors is that they start to get to know the kids and the kids therefore start to get to know them and are expecting them to turn up. Whereas when
Starlight come they have got no idea of what they are, they don't see them often enough. And the Starlight team don't get the opportunity to build up relationships with the kids.

**Advertise well in advance that Captain Starlight is coming**

Alice Springs and Gove Hospitals reported that they were not clear about when Captain Starlight was coming to their service. They stated that a calendar of the Captain Starlight visits would assist them prepare for and make better use of the visits.

*I’d like to have a regular calendar of when they’re actually coming… [So I] can prepare and it can be a reward for kids. And I guess I'd like to see a bit more frequent visits, to have that value. Maybe monthly visits would be enough (Children’s Ward Manager).*

A Captain reported that a calendar would allow services to “count down” to the next Starlight visit.

*… Something like saying ‘it’s three days until Captain Starlight comes’ and then counting down, which we haven’t really organised at the moment. I guess they know it is every second Wednesday, but sometimes some of the nurses say, “Oh, you are here today?” and we are like, “Oh okay, we thought you knew that.” We wanted to have an exciting sort of [count down process]; especially for the kids as well and they can say, “Oh Captain Starlight comes back in four days!”*
**Expansion of Captain Starlight activities**

**Build the Captain Starlight Program into school, preschool and child care health promotion programs**

The Yirrkala and Congress Childcare Centre Coordinators discussed the value of tying Captain Starlight visits into their health promotion activities. The School and Health Centre staff at Yirrkala described the very successful involvement of Captain Starlight in the School screening programme. They reported that as a result of the Captain Starlight involvement the children were jostling to have their immunisation shots, where normally they would be fearful.

The Yirrkala Childcare Centre Coordinator is keen to continue to work closely with the Health Centre to keep children up to date with their immunisations and to involve families in education sessions and activities about nutrition and keeping skin, ears, eyes and teeth healthy. She requested that Captain Starlight come and work with them on these sessions.

*Yeah, that’d be really good. If we can have a program with the Starlight with the Childcare, we could combine with the Preschool. It would be good to translate it into their language as well, in Yolngu Matha language. So when they sing it, the kids are listening and they do sing as well.*

Congress Child Care staff are keen for Captain Starlight to visit regularly and include more health promotion type songs that the kids can learn from. Activities that focus on nose blowing, hand washing and good food messages were seen as particularly important.

*I'm really keen to work with Captain Starlight… because I think that an external force coming in is very valid for children. Children seem to remember things too when other people tell them. So if we could build it up and encourage families to come and share that experience with the children. … We could turn it into a bit of a family day and then, especially if they're doing health messages, it means that the families are getting the message as well and so hopefully with enough input, it will get right through (Childcare Centre Coordinator).*

**Expand Captain Starlight visits to other Aboriginal organisations**

Congress staff suggested that there is potential for Captain Starlight to provide entertainment to a number of Aboriginal organisations in Alice Springs including Yipirinya School, Tangentyere Council, and Congress Alukura.

*It would be great to expand the service… I don’t know whether they’ve considered doing any school visits or anything like that. … I’d say the kids would just gobble it up. I think it would be good to try and access those Yipirinya [School] kids because they would probably miss out on this sort of stuff unless it was on a weekend, you know if they’re at school. The other thing would be to consider talking to Tangentyere. They do playgroups and they work with the Toy Library, but maybe the Captains could tap into some of their rotations around visits to town camps. The kids that are missing out you know. If they’re not sick enough to be at*
the clinic for some reason, they’re not in hospital and not at school, you know that they could get some entertainment. So there’s a lot of scope within the town to do more I think.

Expansion was supported by a Yirrkala health staff member.

I just think that if they could expand the service it would be absolutely fantastic. Maybe they can’t provide a regular service to everywhere but even just to coincide with the screening and things like that. From a remote perspective trying to prevent disease instead of catching up later and trying to get people to think healthy [is important]. We call this ‘Healthy Kids morning’ not sick kids morning or anything like that, it’s called the Healthy Kids Club; when we give out the gifts it’s welcome to the Healthy Kids Club, it is not about illness, it is about keeping your kids healthy and trying to prepare for chronic disease and things like that. So I think they’re contributing to that certainly.

The Nose Blowing Song

Continue to support family days and Christmas activities

Congress Health Service, Congress Child Care Centre and Alice Springs Hospital staff all spoke of the desire to have Captain Starlight involved in family days. The family day held by the Starlight Foundation and Congress in 2006 was highly successful, attracting about 200 people. It hasn’t been repeated because Congress has not had the staff capacity to arrange it. However they reported that they would like to try to make it a yearly event.
Congress asked that Captain Starlight come and entertain the children at their Christmas party held in early December 2008.

**Increase the pool of Captains by training local people**

During the observation visits the Evaluation Team was struck by the ‘uniqueness’ of the Captain Starlight visits to the community health centres. The lack of entertainment available to Aboriginal Children from rural and remote communities was emphasised by interviewees. A number of people suggested the potential of training Local Captains.

The Paediatric Clinic Coordinator at Congress reported that the Starlight Children’s Foundation had raised the possibility of training local people as Captains during their initial meetings in 2006.

*They raised it and I don’t know what happened with those conversations but there were certainly thoughts along those lines that that's what they’d like to do ultimately, is have local performers actually delivering the stuff. So yeah, absolutely I think there’s a lot of potential for people in Alice Springs …it would be great to see some Indigenous faces amongst the Captains and you know, there’s a lot of performers in Alice Springs. If they’ve got the capacity to do it, it should really be supported.*

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**Body painting at Yirrkala**
Appendix 1: Interview questions

Evaluation of the Starlight Children’s foundation work in Regional and Remote communities of the NT

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

Recognition

Are you more likely to bring your child to the clinic when Captain Starlight is here? Why?

Impact

What do you like about Captain Starlight? (Activities, the character of Captain Starlight)

Suggestions for improvement

- What could Captain Starlight do differently?
  - How could the Captain Starlight activities be improved to be more relevant or effective?
  - How often should Captain Starlight visit the health centre?

QUESTIONS FOR HEALTH SERVICE STAFF

Impact

- Has Captain Starlight improved attendance at clinics?
- What are the impacts of captain starlight as entertainment?
  - What sort of atmosphere do you have in the clinic when Captain Starlight is here?
- What are the impacts of the health promotion messages?
  - Does it make a difference having Captain Starlight sharing health promotion information?
  - Does Captain Starlight benefit / make a difference to the work of the health staff?
  - Does it create an extra workload to accommodate Captain Starlight?

Suggestions for improvement

How could the Captain Starlight activities be improved to be more relevant or effective in regional and remote community settings?

- How often should Captain Starlight visit?
Appendix 2: In depth interviewees

Annie Power Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (CAAC)
Rachel Lockie CAAC Alukura
Margaret Harrison CAAC Childcare Centre
Lisa Braedon CAAC Childcare Centre
Sandy Tohi Alice Springs Hospital
Captain Sabrina Starlight Foundation
Captain Phil Starlight Foundation
Captain Suzy Starlight Foundation
Lisita Taulani Yirrkala Childcare Centre
Sharon Weymouth Yirrkala Community Health Centre
Anna Malupo Yirrkala Community Health Centre
Eileen Sporle Royal Darwin Hospital

Additional discussions and opportunistic interviews were held with the School Liaison Officer, Aboriginal Health Worker, parents and helpers at the Yirrkala, Health Centre; parents at Congress Health Centre; the Ward Clerk, nurses and the Paediatrician at Royal Darwin Hospital; and a nurse at Gove Hospital.
Appendix 3: Poster sent to evaluation sites prior to visits

Does Captain Starlight brighten your child’s day?

We’d like to know what you think of Captain Starlight

Why do we want to know?
The Starlight Children’s Foundation wants to know if the Captain Starlight visits to Yirrkala and Gove are enjoyable and valuable for NT children.

How can you give your views?
Two evaluators (Nea Harrison and Di Walker) will visit Yirrkala Health Centre and Gove Hospital when Captain Starlight is entertaining the children to talk to families and friends and health staff who are willing to share their views on the Captain Starlight activities.

What kind of questions will we ask?
What do you like about Captain Starlight?
How do Captain Starlight activities affect your child’s hospital stay?
What could Captain Starlight do differently?

We are not seeking any personal information from parents and friends, children or health staff. We would like to take photos of the Captains entertaining the children, but only with your permission.

What happens to the information?
We will write a report for the Starlight Children’s Foundation and develop a short video presentation using the photos taken.

When will we be here?
We will be at Yirrkala and Gove on Wednesday 27th February.

For further information about this evaluation you can contact Nea Harrison at the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health on (08) 89228705.