



50 Towns in 50 Weeks: bringing the magic of Captain Starlight into the lives of hospitalised children in regional and remote Australia

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This paper outlines a national project developed by Caltex and the Starlight Children's Foundation to bring fun and laughter to children who have an illness in regional and rural Australia. This project involves a national tour of Captain Starlight in a Starlight Express Van to regional towns and rural communities.

Australian children

Thirty-seven per cent of Australian children reside in regional or rural Australia, but the Australian Bureau of Statistics¹ reports that the distribution pattern varies between states (see Table 1).

Table 1 Distribution pattern of children aged 0-14 years¹

State	Major cities	Inner regional	Outer regional	Remote	Very remote
NSW	69.4%	21.9%	7.8%	0.7%	0.1%
VIC	70.9%	23.4%	5.6%	0.1	-
QLD	49.9%	26.8%	18.7%	2.9%	1.8%
WA	66.8%	13.6%	10.8%	5.6%	3.2%
SA	68.5%	13.9%	12.9%	3.6%	1.1%
TAS	-	62.1%	35.6%	1.8%	0.5%
ACT	99.8%	0.2%	-	-	-
NT	-	-	49.1%	21.2%	29.7%
Australia	63.5%	22.2%	11.2%	2.0%	1.2%

Some children living in regional and rural areas will have an illness that will require hospitalisation. A small number of these children will have serious illness that may require frequent and prolonged hospitalisations. Some of these children will be admitted into a large, metropolitan paediatric hospital with a range of specialists and services. However, others will receive treatment in smaller rural and regional hospitals often without dedicated paediatric wards and services.

Hospitalisation takes children out of their normal environment – they have fewer spaces and opportunities to play, act like children and make noise. They are in world that is unfamiliar and filled with adults poking, prodding, inflicting pain and using unfamiliar words. In addition, they are away from the friends, school, families and pets and may become socially disconnected. For a child admitted to a small rural hospital they may find that they are the only child in a ward full of adults and have limited access to children's programs and services such as playrooms, play therapists, hospital schools and computers. Starlight Children's Foundation has wanted to expand its reach to these children for many years.

Starlight Children's Foundation

Starlight Children's Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation that began in 1988 with the aim of brightening the lives of Australian children with a health condition.

An essential element of Starlight's programs is **Captain Starlight**. These highly skilled larger-than-life, fun-filled characters bring the human touch, distraction and entertainment to hospitalised children at a

time when they need it most. In the eyes of the child, Captain Starlight is a super hero who brings laughter, games, jokes and all kinds of silliness into their lives and helps them forget they are sick.

As previously mentioned children's access to distractive and entertainment services varies depending on what is provided within the hospital. In particular (see Table 2), children in regional and rural hospitals often have very limited access to specific children's entertainment services (including some Starlight programs).

Table 2 Comparison of distraction and play services in different hospital settings

Distractive/entertainment Service/program	Metropolitan paediatric hospital	Regional hospital	Small rural hospital
Hospital provided child services, eg playrooms, play therapy	•	Some	x
Starlight Express Room	Majority	x	x
Starlight TV Channel	•	x	x
Ward visits by Captain Starlight	•	Regular visits	x
Starlight Fun Centres	•	•	x
Starlight Express Vans	x	Regular visits	Infrequent or no visits
Starlight Escapes	•	Occasional	x
Starlight Wishes	•	•	Occasional

Starlight provides state-of-the-art multimedia rooms called **Starlight Express Rooms**. These high-tech interactive entertainment rooms are located in seven major paediatric hospitals. Inside these rooms Captain Starlight is the catalyst for fun, magic and mayhem for children and their siblings.

Starlight also provides **Starlight Fun Centres** in many hospitals. Starlight Fun Centres have a Nintendo GameCube, DVD, CD and computer, with a variety of pre-loaded games and movies suitable for young children and adolescents. These mobile entertainment units are wheeled to the child's bed and bring hours of fun and distraction.

Through our **Starlight Escapes** program tickets to events, shows and activities are provided so that children and their families can have fun times together. The tickets and activities are generously donated by corporate and community supporters.

Starlight Wishgranting provides a "wish" for children with a critical or chronic medical condition.

The **Starlight Express Van** program allows Captain Starlight to travel to smaller metropolitan, regional and rural hospitals. At the time the '50 Towns in 50 Weeks' tour started we had four Starlight Express Vans based in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth. The vans are scheduled to regularly visit smaller metropolitan hospitals and occasionally visit regional and rural hospitals. As a result some areas have infrequent visits and a small number have not received any.

50 Towns in 50 Weeks tour

Caltex approached Starlight Children's Foundation seeking a project that could help them mark their 50th year of refining oil in Australia. After consideration, they jointly developed the '50 Towns in 50 Weeks' tour as they saw it as a great opportunity to increase the reach of Starlight programs to children with a health issue in regional, rural and remote areas. The aims of the '50 Towns in 50 Weeks' tour are:

- to allow Starlight to reach children with a health issue who have not had the opportunity to experience the fun and laughter that Captain Starlight could bring,
- to explore how Starlight programs can brighten the lives of Aboriginal children, and



- to contribute to Starlight Escapes and Wishgranting programs in these areas.

The '50 Towns in 50 Weeks' tour involves two Captain Starlights touring Australia in a specially modified van (Starlight Express Van) to visit hospitals, specialist schools and other centres. The van contains equipment that allows the Captains to set up live shows and entertainment within the hospital. The equipment includes; a projector, DVD player, sound mixer, Nintendo GameCube, computer pre-loaded with over 100 movies, microphone, speakers, musical instruments, art and crafts, puppets, toys; face painting, and magic. This allows the Captains to perform magic, singing and dancing shows and provide activities such as watching a movie on the big screen, Nintendo challenges, karaoke, playing music, and art and craft.

To prepare for this national tour the project team developed a list of all regional hospitals with paediatric beds, specialist schools and other clinics that may service children with chronic or serious illnesses. A route was planned that ensured as many of these places were visited as possible. The route was divided into six sectors. The longest sector was nine weeks and the shortest was five. Two Captains were chosen as lead Captains and at least one of these was rostered on every sector of the tour. Other Captains were chosen to accompany them for individual sectors so that two Captains were on the tour at all times.

The tour is currently visiting 50 major regional centres and over 56 smaller towns. The tour commenced in Sydney on 5 May 2006 and has travelled through Queensland, Northern Territory, WA, South Australia, Victoria, and Tasmania and will finish in Sydney on 4 May 2007. The route is marked on the map below.

Figure 1 National Tour



It is estimated that the tour will cover 35 000 kilometres, with shows being provided in 116 hospitals and 22 special schools. This will allow Starlight to brighten the lives of over 2000 children who have a health issue.

Experiences

The Captains have had some amazing experiences, including the visit to a remote community that is a two-hour flight from Darwin. When recalling this visit Captain Starlight wrote in the tour journal:

I noticed a girl in a motorised wheel chair watching the show. Susan is a 17 yr old girl who has spent most of her life looking after her mother. She has older brothers and plenty of Aunties around, but her mother had recently been put into care as she could no longer look after her.

Susan is currently waiting for her Starlight Wish to be granted. I believe she wants to go to Queensland to see the dolphins.

Susan told me that she wanted to make a balloon flower for her mum. So I helped her make various balloons including a puppy and butterfly. She then asked me for a few balloons so that she could take them home and practice. I tried to explain to her that it is very difficult to inflate the balloons without a pump but she insisted and of course I relented. That was the first time I met her and I'll never forget it.

The next day when we visited we went armed with an extra balloon pump for Susan ... we spent time revising what she had learnt yesterday and taught her some new things. It was so difficult to say goodbye to Susan because the chances of meeting her again are so remote. Her carer said that this visit had been such a highlight for Susan that she would be talking about it for months!

That night I couldn't help but wonder what impact we had had on Susan in the short few hours we spent together. We hadn't looked at her as a sick child. All we wanted to do was make her laugh and have fun. I can't help but wish that we were with her everyday to make her feel as special as she is. Her prognosis isn't very positive but I know that she will never be forgotten, not by her community or carer and least of all by me.

Another memorable experience was at a Starlight Escape in Alice Springs that was attended by many of the children from the local Aboriginal camps. Captain Starlight wrote in the tour journal:

As the families arrived the children were shy at first but slowly began to participate. During the magic show they wiggled their fingers to make the magic come to life, but it wasn't until after the show that the true magic happened. Out in the playground, approximately 20 children gathered around and begun asking us many questions. The previously reticent children burst into questions about Captain Starlight and Planet Starlight. Questions like: 'What does your house look like?' 'Do you have any animals?' 'How far away is Planet Starlight?' We pointed in the general direction of Planet Starlight, as it was day time and harder to see than at night, so they asked "So, which star is it?", "The one that shines the brightest!" Captain Starlight replied, to which our friend replied "Oh, I know that one."

The questions came from children of all ages (3-12 years) when we talked about our rocket ship (Van) they asked "Can you show us the wings?" "Who flies it?" "Can we see inside?" "Can I come too?" The children kept asking questions and never left our sides staying with us until their buses arrived to take them back home.

Feedback from hospital personnel

To gauge the effectiveness of the '50 Towns in 50 Weeks' visits we have sought feedback from hospital personnel through a mailed questionnaire. The majority (86%) of respondents have reported that the visit was important and that the diversional therapy and entertainment had helped make the hospital a less threatening and more positive experience for the children. One respondent said that "*Despite 95% of our children being Aboriginal with a different culture and language – performers have been able to adapt their performance to each individual child.*" This demonstrates the universality of laughter and fun.

Other comments about the visits have included:

- adding lightness and fun to daily routine
- improving the positive atmosphere of the ward and filling the ward with happy children noise
- giving children good memories of being in hospital
- allaying children's fears and anxiety about returning to hospital
- making children happy and this helps them to recover more quickly
- breaking the boredom



- allowing children to use their imagination
- provided distraction from treatment and increased co-operation
- allowing staff to observe children playing and doing 'out of hospital' activities
- reducing siblings distress
- providing children with an emotional/social outlet and a sense of belonging.

Several respondents commented on the lack of child services in rural areas and reported that the visit had *"bought the city to the country"* and that it was, *"a wonderful concept."* Some hospitals had incorporated the visit with a Health Promotion program and had successfully used the Captains as a draw card. For hospital staff, the visit had provided some 'time-out' for the nursing staff as the children were occupied and content.

What have we learnt from the '50 Towns in 50 Weeks' tour?

When the tour started we were uncertain how Captain Starlight and the entertainment programs would be perceived by Aboriginal children. What the Captains have found is that their interaction with the Indigenous children starts more gently. As the children have been a little tentative the Captains have worked at gaining their trust by playing quieter games. Once this trust was gained they then lift the energy level and the children then become fully engaged.

The Indigenous children have seemed indifferent to the new technology that fascinates children in metropolitan areas. They are much more interested in the Captain Starlight stories, practical games and being taught how to do things rather than just being shown the end result. Therefore, the Captains have relied more heavily on their improvisation skills, their craft skills and their creativity. Questions such as those already described, has meant that the story of Captain Starlight has been embellished by these children. The Northern Territory children have given Captain Starlight an Aboriginal name.

What is next for Starlight Children's Foundation in regional and rural Australia?

Starlight Children's Foundation is currently working on a number of exciting opportunities to expand our reach into regional and rural Australia. These include the following.

Extending the Starlight Express Van Program

Since the tour started we have employed more Captains and introduced Starlight Express Vans in the Northern Territory, South Australia and the ACT. The Northern Territory Captains now visit Nhulunbuy and Katherine Hospitals once a fortnight, Alice Springs Hospital once a month and Darwin Hospital two or three times a week. The response to their visits has been overwhelmingly positive:

When we arrived on the Ward the nurses told us that one of the children had met the 50 Towns Captains and loved them so much that he wanted to go back to Planet Starlight with them. So when we met Bill who is a seven year old Indigenous boy he ran to us like we were old friends. There was no cultural divide, no shyness, just an excited boy ready to have some magic and fun with Captain Starlight.

To increase our presence in these areas, Starlight Children's Foundation is committed to doubling the number of Starlight Express Vans on the road (see Table 3).

Table 3 Future expansion of Starlight Express Vans

State	Number of vans on the road in 2007	Number of vans aimed for by 2010
NSW	1	5
ACT	1	1
NT	1	2
QLD	1	2
VIC	1	2
WA	1	1
SA	1	1
Total	7	14

Developing a Regional Program Model

To meet the needs of regional and remote children and young people more effectively, Starlight Children's Foundation is developing a Regional Program Model. This project includes consulting with key stakeholders including children, young people and their families to identify their needs. This will include consultation with the Aboriginal community to ensure that the model is congruent with their needs and culture. Based on the findings of this consultation the proposed model will be trialled during 2007.

Developing an Online Community

It is envisaged that this secure online community program will reduce the social isolation of young people (10-18 years old) living with serious illness as it will allow them to stay connected with their family, friends and school life. This program will offer cutting-edge communication features such as video-conferencing, email, instant messaging and chat rooms to keep them connected to family, friends and other young people with an ongoing health issue in Australia, USA and Canada.

Conclusion

The '50 Towns in 50 Weeks' tour has highlighted the need to increase the opportunities for distractive therapy and entertainment for children in regional and rural hospitals, and has provided some insights into how we can effectively work with Indigenous children and communities. Starlight Children's Foundation is committed to extending its reach into regional and rural Australia, but as a not-for-profit organisation this can only be achieved through our partnerships with the health system, corporations and communities. The '50 Towns in 50 Weeks' project has only been made possible by the generous sponsorship of Caltex and the willing participation of the regional health system and the communities the tour has reached.

Reference

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Australian demographic statistics. Cat. No. 3101.0. Canberra: ABS. 2003.

Presenter

Kylie Johnson graduated university with a degree in psychology and has worked in the not-for-profit sector ever since. She started working for the Programs Department of the Starlight Children's Foundation over six years ago and during that time has worked in every program area, including Starlight Wishgranting, Starlight Fun Centres, Starlight Express Rooms and Starlight Express vans. Kylie is currently the project manager of the '50 Towns in 50 Weeks' tour, which aims to bring the fun and entertainment of Captain Starlight to regional and remote hospitalised children.