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Submission to Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory

Re: Insufficient Allied Health Services for Children and Young People in Northern Territory

We are Paediatricians based at Alice Springs Hospital. Some of us have worked in the Northern Territory (NT) for over ten years. We provide inpatient and outpatient services to Alice Springs babies, children and young people. Additionally we provide regular clinic services to Tennant Creek and remote Indigenous communities across Central Australia and the APY lands in South Australia. Amongst our staff we have an International newborn and child health expert providing advice to the World Health Organisation globally and in the region.

There are insufficient allied health services for children and young people with developmental and behavioural problems in Central Australia and the Top End. Management of children with developmental and behavioural problems requires a multidisciplinary approach and there are insufficient allied health professionals (speech therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, social workers and psychologists) to assess and provide ongoing early intervention to children with special needs.

The proportion of all outpatient paediatric referrals that are for behavioural and/or developmental problems are 40% at Alice Springs Hospital, 50% at Royal Darwin Hospital and 75% at one of the largest Aboriginal Medical Services in the NT. At present there is no speech therapist serving the children in remote areas of Central Australia. In Darwin there is a 12 month wait for an initial allied health assessment. But at least in Darwin there are a few private allied health providers. They do not exist in Central Australia and the waiting time for referral to the Child Development team at Flynn Drive Community Centre, Alice Springs is currently 24 months.

We know of clients with severe developmental delay in remote Central Australian communities that have not seen any allied health professionals by the age of 18 months, thus missing out on any early intervention at a time when intervention is most effective. Older children with behavioural problems that have not received psychology and other mental health services are at greater risk of developing more challenging anti-social behaviours, encounters with the juvenile justice service and subsequent detention.

As a priority we believe that the Northern Territory requires an urgent human resource strategy that addresses; staff numbers, skill mix, staff placement based on needs, recruitment, retention, supervision and professional development. Without the development of an equitable allied health service, a medical check-up by a Paediatrician is almost worthless. We know the need and we need action from the Northern Territory government to address the problem.

Yours sincerely,

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