



Senate Inquiry into the prevalence of different types of speech, language and communication disorders and speech pathology services in Australia

Apunipima Cape York Health Council

[apunipima.org.au](http://apunipima.org.au)

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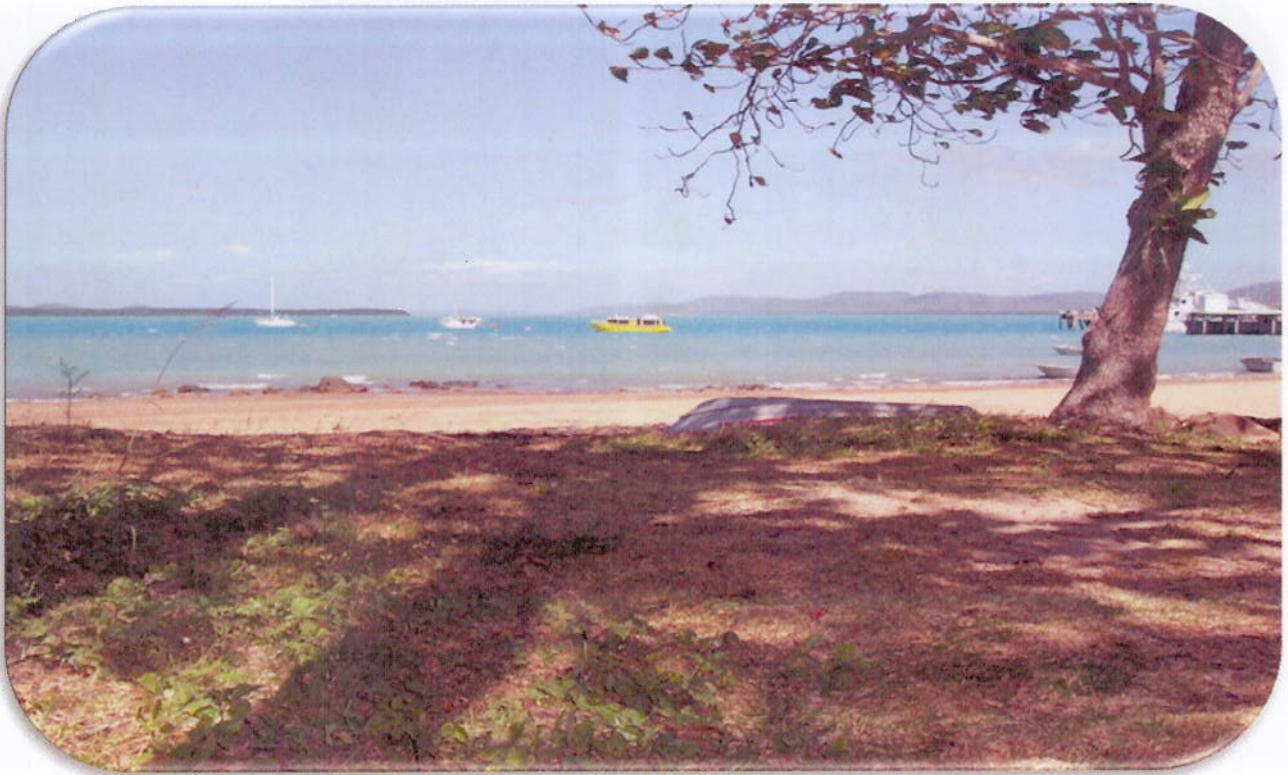
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- In Australia, access to speech pathology is a postcode lottery
- People in Cape York have less access to speech pathologists than many other parts of Australia
- People in Cape York are disproportionately affected
- Specific challenges with rural and remote service delivery



### Particular impacts:

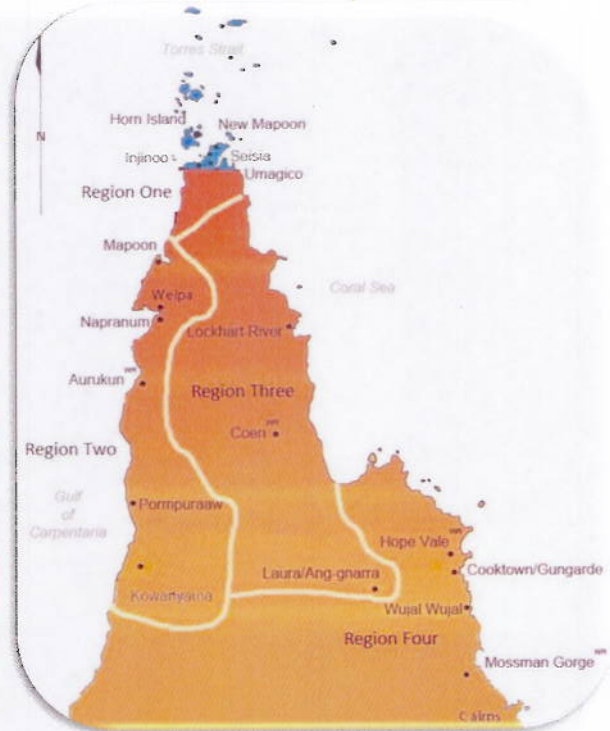
- Overall poor socioeconomic and educational profile of the region
- Multilingual families
- Ear disease and deafness
- Impact of nutrition and access to healthy food
- Social, emotional and spiritual well-being
- Impact of marginalisation

### Further compounded by:

- Geographical and seasonal constraints (cyclones, flooding, road closures)



- Communication (yarning) is an important aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture
- Aboriginal English, Torres Strait Islander Creole and/or one of the many traditional languages are commonly spoken in Cape York
- Language is one way culture is represented, passed on and the way in which one views the world
- Cultural and linguistic factors make speech pathology in Cape York additionally complex
- Time with communities is required to develop partnerships, trust, collaboration



## Case Study

- Five year old girl from Lockhart River with severe cerebral palsy
- From Lockhart River: 800km north of Cairns
- Lockhart River has approximately 700 people from six distinct language (groups) groups
- Her mum speaks an impressive eight traditional languages and reports her daughter understands four (despite her limited ability to speak)



- At age three: feeding tube inserted: her feeding problems meant it was too slow and difficult to get enough food in orally
- Sole form of nutrition: mum reports she's too scared to feed her own child for fear of choking or food going into her lungs
- Due to remoteness: not able to access early intensive feeding therapy required
- It may be that she could have improved her feeding skills to the point of not needing a tube if she had have had access to early intensive therapy



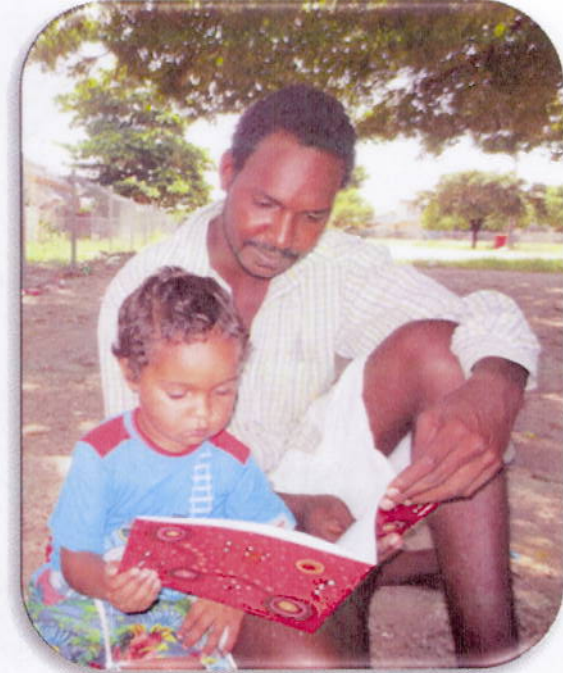
- Currently, I am seeing her when she and I are both in Cairns and working to improve her feeding
- Hers is one of many cases in Cape York where people don't receive the necessary treatment purely because of where they live
- Kowanyama, Weipa, Cooktown are just a few of many places voicing a desperate need for speech therapy services
- 200 people identified: just the tip of the iceberg.
- One speech pathologist for health cannot possibly be effective across such a large region with these numbers





## What is Apunipima doing?

- First dedicated speech pathology position in Cape York
- Early intervention with speech therapy assessment and therapy for children 0-5 years
- Biggest impact through prevention and early treatment before school: critical time when trajectories are set for at risk populations



We are also taking a proactive population-based preventative approach:

- Health worker led home-visiting education program
- Embedding speech and language: seven of 15 educational visits from pregnancy to 1000 days
- Critical time for early brain and language development
- Investing in the early years of life is crucial



## What we would like from here:

- Expand speech therapy services to other Cape York communities
- Combination of additional speech pathology positions and trained speech pathology health workers
- Incorporate telehealth as a means of increasing our reach (extend Medicare incentives for telehealth)
- Trained interpreters for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages to be recognised and resourced

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### Future plans:

- Grow a Cape York Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander speech pathology workforce through university cadetships and new graduate programs
- Close the gap through improving education, health and employment with significant life-long cost savings through prevention and early intervention
- Flow on benefits to communities with the training, education and employment our organisation provides

*Directly investing in speech pathology in Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations makes economic sense*