

## Mobile low-care nursing home in the bush

Cherie Nichols<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Carers NT

---

Cherie Nichols, Coordinator of The Mobile Overnight Respite Service, has been employed by Carers NT for five years. In her role, she has successfully started and grown this innovative remote program from conception. This service provides much-needed respite to Indigenous carers on remote Northern Territory communities that have little access to culturally appropriate nursing homes or respite centres. As well as coordinating and organising this service, she is required to do hands-on delivery of this respite service with the two to three weeks in the bush where she sets up a camp (nursing home) and provides 24-hour personal care, meals are cooked on an open fire, she collects firewood, water and provides culturally appropriate outings for the recipients whilst reporting on daily activities. The main goal this is to give carers a break from their caring role without having to put their care recipient in a nursing home in Darwin. Due to cultural issues this is not always appropriate, so the remote respite camps are often the only respite option available for Indigenous low-care frail aged care recipients. Cherie also works with the other Carers NT remote programs; Troopy Program, Mental Health Troopy Program and alternative respite. Her presentations at the International Ficcdat Conference, Toronto, 2008; International Carers Conference, Leeds, 2010 and numerous national conferences have been well received. She has featured in a Rural Health Education Foundation Remote Dementia series and received a 2009 Minister's Award for Excellence in Aged Care. Cherie also strongly advocates for Indigenous family carers with Centrelink and other organisations.

Cherie has overcome cultural barriers by developing strong relationships with key people in the community who assist her with the delivery of the service. She endeavours to learn as much of the languages, traditional skills and listens to her clients.

---

This is not an academic paper; this is a description of a practical, culturally appropriate, respite option.

Carers NT received funding in 2006 for the National Respite for Carers Program funded by the Department of Health and Ageing.

I was employed by Carers NT in February 2006 to create, coordinate and run the new and innovative Remote Mobile Overnight Respite Service.

The Remote Respite Camp Program (RRcamp) gives culturally appropriate respite to Indigenous Carers without the care recipients having to leave their remote community.

The service provides overnight respite for 5-20 low care, frail aged recipients for a 1 to 4 week period on remote communities that do not have residential respite centres.

The service provides a Respite Camp with 24 hour care in tents, with all necessities provided.

### Preparation for RR Camp

After consultation with key stakeholders, an "Entering Aboriginal Lands permit" must be obtained for workers before heading out to any community.

The vehicle, trailer, chainsaw, generator and dingy, motor, satellite phone, first aid supplies must be checked, serviced and in good working order. The appropriate amount of camping gear, supplies and food must be purchased and packed into the trailer and Troopy. If the Troopy and trailer are travelling to one of the remote islands by Barge, then fresh and frozen food is sent in refrigerated units on this.

Carers NT provide two staff, three if required. The staff must have their Senior First Aid certificate, Safe Food handling Certificate, 4WD Off Road Driving, winch and recovery Certificate, a Chainsaw Certificate and Operate and maintaining small motors certificate.

The staff are required to drive the Toyota Troop Carrier (Troopy) with a 3.7m roof topper boat and tow a 8X5 trailer equipped with things such as tents, mattresses, bedding, clothes, care-aid equipment, generator, chainsaws, catering equipment, food, water.

## Setting up a RR Camp

When arriving at the community I meet with traditional owners, carers and recipients and discussed suitable camping places. Once the site is chosen, which is usually close to a creek or beach and ideally relatively close to the community (20-40km away so as to have access to Health Clinic and supplies) The Carers NT staff go out and set up the Respite Camp.

Setting up the Camp is a labour intensive job: The camp area must be cleared, the trailer and troopy unloaded, tents put up and beds made. The Kitchen tent is setup for cooking and food storage. Also, water has to be sourced and firewood gathered.

When the Camp is set up and comfortable, we go and pick up the eager, low care, frail aged indigenous recipients from the community and bring them out to the camp.

## At an RR Camp

Each day the care recipients choose where they would like to go and what they would like to do!!

The daily outings differ on every community but usually involves gathering bush tucker, daily outings include collecting Sea turtle eggs, fresh water crocodile eggs, magpie geese eggs, water lily seed, sugar bag(bush honey), plums, nuts, Yams(bush potato) and shellfish. The clients also enjoy fishing and hunting for crabs, stingray, crocodiles, turtles, file snakes, possum and goanna. Quite often, the hunters of the community will drop off to the camp larger game, like wallabies, pigs and buffalo for the elders.

Whilst on the camps, we focus on healthy traditional living. This includes eating a variety of bush foods and obtaining these bush food usual requires a certain amount of exercise. It also provides the care recipient with a sense of pride and wellbeing, as they are able to bring back bush tucker for their families which improve the health and wellbeing of the family and the community.

In addition to the bush foods, we provide three nutritional meals a day, taking into consideration dietary and physical requirements e.g., diabetes, renal, allergies and lack of teeth.

Due to cultural reasons some foods cannot be eaten by some clients, i.e.: if their totem or their children's totem is catfish or turtle they are unable to eat this and an alternative food is supplied.

Another popular daily activity is collecting bush materials to make traditional arts and crafts such as dilly bags, necklaces, ceremonial decorations, mats and baskets.

Whilst on the camp we also travel to and attend ceremonies and funerals. When possible we travel into town for shopping and for Centrelink appointments.

## Challenges of RR Camp Program

One of the biggest challenges we face in delivering the Mobile Overnight Respite Service is the extreme weather and environment.

The RRcamp Program can only operate seven months of the year in the in the Dry Season. The Wet Season is too humid with torrential rain, which makes it impossible to run this service.

We drive a Toyota Troop Carrier as this vehicle is suitable for the remoteness of the communities we service. It can be challenging driving long distances, on unsealed, water damaged and unmaintained roads and tracks.

Crocodiles are very prolific in the areas we service throughout the top end of the Northern Territory. They pose a challenge in almost everything we do whether it is setting up camp, driving through creek crossings or fishing and collecting numerous types of bush-tucker.

Other wildlife that can present challenges in remote areas are animals like buffalo, bullock, pigs/boars, snakes and biting insects like mosquitoes and spiders.

Another challenge is the language barrier and cultural differences. You only have to travel 40km and the aboriginal language and culture are totally different.

This challenge is overcome by building relationships with community members and clients, patience and increasing cultural awareness over time.

Whilst the Remote Mobile Overnight Respite Service continues to face challenges in its delivery, the positive outcomes and benefits to the Clients, Carers and Communities compensate for any difficulties.

### Positive outcomes of RR Camps

This service is constantly evolving and has recently worked with other health education service providers as a way to provide a more effective and appropriate way to deliver vital health information and education to these communities.

The service is also much more cost effective than the alternative of sending the frail aged care recipient to a nursing home in Darwin to provide respite for the family carer. The cost of sending an aged recipient into a Darwin nursing home include: flights for the Care recipient and escort, Nursing home costs, support and accommodation for escorts or extra flights for them to return to the community and a flight to return back to the city at the end of the care recipients respite stay.

For many Indigenous Carers and care recipients, respite away from their homelands is not an option due to cultural and personal reasons.

The Remote Respite Camp Program is able to provide several family Carers with respite as opposed to a one-off response to a single client going to a nursing home in Darwin.

Over the past 5 years the Remote Respite Camp Program has helped promote the profile of Carers on communities. This has reduced the need for urban-based residential respite, as we are able to support Carers before they reach crisis point which in turn allows them to continue caring for longer and ultimately reduce permanent nursing home admissions.

#### **Example: *Mary* (not her real name) a 74-year-old female client from a very remote community**

When we picked *Mary* up from her home on the community to go out to the RR Camp, she was weak and frail due to lack of nutrition and exercise and could barely lift her head to communicate. *Mary* could only take a few steps and have to be lifted into the Troopy to go out to Camp. After twenty one days of eating nutritious meals, taking her medication regularly, sleeping, hunting and being with her peers, *Mary's* mental and physical health had improved remarkably.

The Health Clinic, family and other people on the community commented on the amazing difference in *Mary*. I also met with her family and organised a meeting with the clinic and family to talk about having her cataracts done. This has since happened, and *Mary* now walks confidently around the community and is able to go to the community store, clinic and other services by herself.

#### **Extract from RR Camp diary of a day at camp, Belyuen Community: Thursday 30/4/09**

I heard Yvonne (client) awake at 6am, so I got out of my tent and got the fire going and put some water on for her to have a wash and make a billy of tea. After we had a cup of tea, Yvonne woke Maggie up to go down fishing with her. Maggie caught a parrot fish and Yvonne caught a catfish. When the other three clients woke up, Lyn (staff) and I cooked porridge, toast and tea for breakfast. Maggie cooked up the catfish for herself and Yvonne on the coals. At 9.30am, we loaded up the troopy with water, tea, sugar, lunch and digging implements to go out to Bombey for the day digging yams. I also got clothes, towels and soap for us all to have a Bogey (bath) at Diamond Creek on the way back to camp. We stopped at Belyuen Community so Yvonne and Esther could go to the Health Clinic to get their Webster packs of tablets. After stopping at the shop for cold drinks, we drove the 45min very washed-out bumpy track out to Bombey. The clients were very happy and excited about going to dig yam and laughed when we hit all the bumps. When we arrived and unloaded everyone with the food and digging gear, it was straight off into the bush to find and dig for yams (Mooto Mooto). Alice found some vines and dug a metre down in the black sand using an empty fruit tin and a shovel to find a few really big fat ones, so she was very excited. After a couple of hours digging one metre deep holes in black sand in the midday heat, we went down into the mangroves to collect the shellfish long bum. I found a dead mangrove tree and hacked at it with the little hatchet and found the ladies some mangrove

worms. The ladies were very happy and started looking around for more dead trees, lucky for me they didn't find any as it is hard work chopping with a hatchet in this heat and humidity!

When we finally all got back to the Troopy, I got everyone a cold drink while I got a fire started and boiled up a billy of tea. We all enjoyed the cup of tea, biscuits, yams, long bum and mangrove worms under a big shady tree on the beach. When it was time to go, I loaded all the gear and the clients back into the Troopy and we headed back towards camp along the rough track stopping at Diamond creek. We did stop once before Diamond Creek to try and crack a goanna over the head with a lump of wood, but the little fella was just too fast. Diamond Creek was really cold so we all had a quick bath and swim before heading on back out to camp. We had to stop a second time to try catching another goanna but he disappeared into a hole, the ladies tried smoking him out, but they had no luck. We got back on the bitumen near Belyuen Community and then drove 10km back into Wagait Beach Store where we got a couple of supplies from the store. eg bread, ice and fruit. We got back to camp at 5.30pm where Lyn, who had stayed at camp and had cleaned up, sorted out fishing lines and had a beef and vegetable stew and rice on the camp fire. I settled the clients with drinks and cups of tea and unloaded the troopy and swept it out before loading up all the empty water containers and the fuel containers for the generator and headed back into Wagait Beach to fill them. The clients stayed at Camp with Lyn where they played cards for a while. When I got back to Camp we had dinner and after cleaning up we went and sat down the beach to watch the beautiful sunset. Yvonne was tired from digging yam and being up so early so she went to bed. We sat around the fire chatting until about at 8.30pm and then got the clients settled into their tent for the night. Lyn and I sat around the fire for a little until the clients had gone to sleep before going into out tents at 10pm.

### **Extract Palumpa Remote Respite Camp diary 15/09/09**

The ladies were up early stripping their Tichi Mubi (sand palm) to make dilly bags. I made breakfast at 8am. I headed into Palumpa to the store with Mabel and Margaret. Lyn (Carers NT Staff member) and the other ladies stayed at Camp. I went to drop Mabel home but no one was there so we went to Miriam and she wasn't there so we went to the shop and everyone was there. I got the groceries for camp. The truck came in today so there was fresh fruit and vegs. Then we headed back to camp where Lyn (staff member) had cleaned up the camp and cleaned the trailer and troopy. The ladies spent a couple of hours chipping the yellow colour off the root and pulverising it, then boiling it up in flour tins with their prepared tichi mubi to dye the fibre for making their dilly bags.

At lunch time Darrell turned up with the promised Kangaroo (la Wonga). They had shot two so the ladies said to give one to Rollo's family in Palumpa. Darrell and Thomas gutted and hung the roo and had some lunch and a cold drink before going to Palumpa.

Lyn and the ladies took off looking for sugar bag (bush honey) as it was too hot sitting at camp. I put on some dinner and boiled up the tea towels and did some washing. Darrell and Thomas dropped in on the way past for a cold drink and to ask if I could talk to Mabel about him getting permission to take some didgeridoo tree off her land, he talked to her about the trees. When Lyn came back with the ladies they had some watermelon and then Lyn, Miriam and Mabel headed off to look for some round river stones to cook the Kangaroo in an earth pit. Margaret, Rebecca and Camillia dug the hole across the road and cut paperback and collected leaves to cover the meat in the pit. When Lyn and the others came back we collected wood and lit a fire with the rocks on top. The ladies cut up the kangaroo and Mabel fried up some of the choice cuts. When the fire had burnt down and we were putting in the kangaroo the pit, Darrell and Thomas came back with a very large black bream they had caught for Mabel. We covered the roo with leaves then paperback and earth. We left it to cook for a couple of hours. Darrell and Thomas took off pig hunting. We sat around talking and laughing while we waited for it to cook. Some of the ladies went down the creek for tut tut (bath). Camillia worriedly looked for her lost thongs. After two hours Margaret, Rebecca and Camillia uncover the kangaroo and we put it in a cardboard box and sat on the tarp and the ladies ate it with rice. Miriam's husband Roger and son came out as they had heard the ladies were cooking the kangaroo so, they ended up with tail and some tobacco off Mabel. Then they headed up to Darrell and Thomas's camp further up the track. We had our baths and Lyn and Miriam left to go and retrieve our torch as Darrell had left them in his car. I went into our tent to start to write the diary but heard the ladies yelling Mar garn, Mar garn (my aboriginal name means water lily). So I went over to them and asked what they needed. They asked if Lyn had an aboriginal name and I said "no not from this way" so they said they had talked and wanted her to be

called Coombie which is a special water hole in Palumpa. So when Lyn came back, we all called her over saying come here Coombie. Lyn was very happy to get her name. The ladies asked me to tell them a story while they all lay around resting I asked what story so they asked for the story of when Chrissie and I went to Bali so I told them all about our holiday until everybody started to go to sleep. It is a very hot still night Lyn started the generator and we all went into our tents. It's been a big day.

### **Extract from Minjilang / Croker Island RR Camp diary Wednesday 15/09/10**

Another good night, everyone was up by 6.30am, wanting breakfast so I made toast, tea and porridge. I took everyone into to Minjilang to go to the clinic at 9.30am for a check up; the doctor is in for his fortnightly visit. Chrissie (Carers NT staff) took everything out of the ladies' tent and swept and mop it, as it was very dirty from them all being in there all day yesterday keeping out of the wind. The doctor plane was late so I dropped everyone home for showers then went and picked them all up again and went back to the clinic. Margaret kept telling the doctor she was happy, happy, happy because she was out bush. They all got seen by the doctor and got their fortnightly medication. I bought the now tired and hungry ladies back for lunch at 2pm. I got some medicine for my sinuses but it made the problem worse so I had to go back in to see the clinic after lunch, then I went to wait for the barge to bring fuel. The fuel wasn't going to be unloaded now until tomorrow morning so I talked to the CEO, Cameron, and finally convinced him to let me have some after waiting around the council office for a couple of hours. I got back to camp at 5.30pm and the ladies were all resting in the tent so after we made them another cup of tea and gave them some biscuits, we went down for a fish. I caught 3 big snapper and Chrissie caught a small one. I filleted them while Chrissie put on some vegs and rice and done the fillets in bread crumbs. "Delicious nothing is better than fresh fish for dinner!" I killed the mozzies in the ladies tent while Chrissie washed and cleaned up and after our bucket bath we were in our tents at 9.30 pm.

This service is important as it enables Carers NT to provide culturally appropriate respite care to Indigenous Family Carers without sending the recipient to a nursing home in town.

This is follow-on from the success of the Carers NT "Troopy Programs".

Needless to say the indigenous care recipients on remote communities of the Top End eagerly anticipate the yearly camps as do their Carers.