



Issues Paper

# Facilities, Programs and Services for Water Safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Rural and Remote Australia

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## Executive Summary

This paper was produced to examine key issues in water safety, including the health, economic and social benefits of swimming pool use for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Drowning and water safety are important issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have been identified by The National Water Safety Plan 2004-2007 as an at-risk group. As a general principle, water safety organisations and community bodies should work together to develop flexible, creative policies and practices in water safety service provision. The paper demonstrates how such an approach can improve broader health, economic and social outcomes for whole communities.

Water safety organisations have begun to establish community development programs in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities which use swimming pool facilities in a variety of ways. Swimming pool infrastructure is a tool for social capital development; it provides programs for the development of foundation aquatic skills; it acts as a hub for community interaction and it creates wider opportunities for employment and skills development within the community. This paper considers how communities can move beyond the basic assumption that swimming pools are a facility for child swimming activity alone, so that they are effectively utilised as a community resource and asset.

When swimming pools and water safety programs are used to their greatest efficacy in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the benefits are wider than improvements in water safety alone. There are known skin, ear and eye health benefits for children of regular and sustained swimming pool use; the installation of swimming pools creates numerous other opportunities in the community in terms of employment, skills development and social interaction; swimming pool facilities represent a safe and controlled environment for community members of all ages to learn, interact and be involved. Significantly, when incorporated appropriately into broader school and community strategies, swimming pools are an effective tool to encourage students to attend school and to actively engage them in the learning process.

Water safety programs are most effective when used within a health promotion framework, in which communities develop initiatives at the local level that utilise swimming pool facilities. This allows the community to simultaneously address a number of community-identified priorities, beyond that of water safety (priorities such as health, employment, skills development, education and youth diversion).

This paper examines the principles involved in developing appropriate approaches to ensuring that community and water safety priorities are realised at the local level. Successful health promotion initiatives have community-wide support and incorporate existing community infrastructure.

The health, economic and social benefits of pool use and water safety programs are most effective when communities develop strategies in conjunction with other community-identified priorities. As such, policymakers are encouraged to adopt an open-minded approach to water safety practice and to investigate the possibilities in terms of working with other community groups to develop strategies that encompass outcomes for the population as a whole.

Issues for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and water safety organisations that have been identified over the course of this investigation are:

- **Drowning rates:** comparatively high rates of drowning make water safety a priority for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- **Access to and efficacy of water safety programs:** communities and water safety organisations must ensure that community members have access to water facilities and water safety programs and that these programs effectively target the specific needs of individual communities.
- **Use of current infrastructure:** communities and water safety organisations must recognise that swimming pools are a community asset and work to ensure they are utilised and maintained to their greatest capacity.
- **Benefits of pools:** communities should work to maximise the multiple health, economic and social benefits of pools for the entire population. This involves ongoing resource commitments at the pool and community level.
- **Linking water to educational practices:** benefits of pools can be best exploited if water safety programs operate in conjunction with strategies that target other community priorities, including child education. The success of integrated community strategies requires the full support of each community body involved.
- **Community engagement:** successful health promotion initiatives actively engage entire communities in developing successful strategies.

This paper found that school attendance programs using the pool are possible but need to be incorporated into wider attendance programs and whole of community commitment must be ensured. A case study of the 'No School No Pool' program reflects these issues in the practical application of an attendance program using the pool in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This case study demonstrates the complexity of integrating broader community priorities into water-based policies and makes clear the potential of such policy to concurrently and effectively address a variety of community concerns. A health promotion framework implemented within the school structure therefore represents a community initiative that is mutually beneficial for water safety and for health, economic and educational outcomes.

While this paper brings together current knowledge and understanding of community programs based around local swimming pools and water safety, it raises further questions and is a call to action to both develop and implement these programs more effectively. It is suggested that water

safety organisations work closely with existing community bodies to engage the local population in supporting programs that use water facilities as a means of addressing other, more broadly identified community priorities.

## **Recommendations**

This paper identifies several benefits of the use of swimming pools that address a range of community priorities, including health and fitness, education, employment and skills development, social participation, youth diversion and water safety. Governments, communities and program operators must develop and implement programs to ensure that potential benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are maximised. As such, a number of recommendations are offered in the areas of program development and delivery, community and/or government support, skills development and research.

It is recommended that:

### **Program development and delivery**

- All remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have access to swimming pool facilities, either in their community, a neighbouring community or in a regional centre.
- Possibilities are explored for the development of a nationwide program which supports the use of remote pools for the health, economic and social benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- New and effective water safety programs are developed to target the specific needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Existing water safety programs are adapted to become more effective in targeting the specific needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Targeted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander water safety programs are incorporated into health promotion and education strategies that address broader community-identified priorities.
- A national registry of pools in remote communities is developed, including number of pools, current uses, opening hours/periods and skills of staff.

### **Community and/or government support**

- Water safety organisations work in partnership with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to develop relevant and culturally appropriate programs. Whole of community support is essential to the success of these programs.
- Governments and communities provide ongoing support and resourcing commitments to swimming pool facilities to maximise their accessibility for all members of the community.
- A cross-community network of swimming pools is developed to help the transfer of skills between communities, thus providing mobile populations with opportunities for regular pool access.

### **Skills development**

- Local community members are provided with opportunities to develop skills in aquatics, pool management and pool maintenance to ensure communities are self-sufficient in operating and maintaining swimming pool facilities and associated programs.

### **Research**

- Further research should be undertaken into the circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drowning and into possible effective drowning prevention strategies.

- Further research should be undertaken into strategies that incorporate swimming pools into teaching and learning practice, encouraging schools and communities to implement new and flexible educational practice.

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## Introduction

Water and water-based activities are an important part of the Australian culture. The Australian population as a whole is very active in, on and around the water. Australians swim regularly at beaches and rivers, in public and backyard pools, and enjoy activities such as boating, surfing and snorkelling<sup>1</sup>. This regular exposure to the water raises the issue of water safety, as in as many places as Australians are around the water, they can also drown in the water. Drowning is the fourth largest cause of unintentional death in Australia<sup>2</sup>. Water safety is therefore important for all Australians and involves ensuring that people are adequately prepared to use their aquatic environments<sup>2</sup>. The development of foundation aquatic skills is essential for water safety. Australian water safety organisations are responsible for working to ensure that all Australians have opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills that will make them safe in, on and around the water.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been identified by the National Water Safety Plan 2004-2007 as an at-risk group in need of targeted drowning prevention programs<sup>2</sup>. This group has four times the drowning rate of the general Australian population<sup>3</sup>, and as such, the Plan recommends that 'Access and availability of facilities, water safety programs and services be appropriately increased to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities'<sup>2</sup>.

In response to this recommendation, Royal Life Saving Society Australia (RLSSA) has produced this issues paper to review current programs and practices which target remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It also represents an opportunity to identify the key issues in making these facilities and programs more widely available and more effective in addressing water safety needs.

This paper takes the provision of water safety programs a step further, investigating how these can incorporate or be incorporated by educational activities and policy in communities where attendance rates and student engagement are issues of great concern. Considering Australians' love of the water, facilities such as community swimming pools are an underutilised resource for flexible teaching practices and the engagement of students in learning. Pool facilities also provide communities with opportunities for employment and training.

As this is a preliminary rather than conclusive study on water safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities, issues for consideration by water safety service providers and communities are discussed and areas for further research are identified. These issues include drowning rates; the accessibility and efficacy of water safety programs; the use and benefits of swimming pools; and integrating water safety into broader community strategies and priorities. A case study on the 'No School No Pool' program as an attendance strategy brings together these issues and examines how they arise in the practical application of the program.

The result is a comprehensive discussion of issues in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander water safety and school attendance strategy for consideration by water safety organisations, remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community councils and schools, and governments.

## Scope

This issues paper focuses on water safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in rural and remote areas of Australia. This section of the Australian population has been made the focus of this paper in response to the National Water Safety Plan recommendation that ‘Access and availability of facilities, water safety programs and services be appropriately increased to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities’<sup>2</sup>.

It addresses water safety issues for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population as a whole but concentrates on implications for program provision to school-aged children in an educational context. The paper centres on this group as extensive opportunities exist for remote communities to incorporate targeted water safety programs into school-based educational programs and policy, adding to the diversity of teaching and the enjoyment by children. References to school attendance and program development pertain to both primary and secondary education in government and non-government schools.

Remote communities are identified in terms of the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ remoteness classification which uses the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) for the collection and dissemination of geographically classified statistics<sup>4</sup>. This classification divides Australia into six remoteness area classes: major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote, very remote and migratory. It uses the ARIA (Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia) index to classify remoteness. Remote areas refer to those Census Collection Districts with an average ARIA index value greater than 5.92 and less than or equal to 10.53. Very Remote Australia consists of Census Collection Districts with an average ARIA index value greater than 10.53<sup>4</sup>.

The case study evaluates an attendance program that incorporates the swimming pool into school policy. It is a reflection of the situation as it exists in the Northern Territory. The case study was restricted to the Northern Territory in order to provide a discreet population with similar circumstances in terms of curriculum, legislative jurisdiction and to ensure that variances in community background and structure did not influence the consistency of results.

## How to use this document

This issues paper is divided into three main sections:

- Literature Review - the literature review provides background information and identifies the key issues that pertain to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander water safety, educational practice and health promotion.
- Issues – this section identifies eight principal issues in the development and provision of water safety programs in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It discusses the factors involved in the implementation of programs that address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander water safety for consideration by water safety organisations, remote community leaders and organisations and government agencies.
- Case Study – the case study examines the ‘No School No Pool’ concept as an example of school attendance policy which incorporates pool facilities as an integral element of the program. It details significant issues that arise for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the implementation of such a program.

## Literature Review

### Aims

- To examine key water safety issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (with a focus on the incidence of drowning)
- To identify proven strategies for improving the water safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to identify areas for potential improvement.
- To investigate school based participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by examining issues of absenteeism, learning and engagement.
- To identify issues for using the local pool in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- To examine the health, economic, social and other benefits of swimming pools in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

### Methods

Between 19 November 2007 and 20 December 2007 an examination of the following databases was undertaken:

- Academic Search Premier (EBSCO)
- Australian and Torres Strait Islander Health Bibliography (ATSIHealth)
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)
- Indigenous Australia: ATSIC Library
- Indigenous Studies Bibliography
- Medline (OVID)
- PubMed

The following keywords were used in the database search: swimming; swimming pool; indigenous education; indigenous school attendance; drowning.

A web-based Google search was also conducted over the same period using the following keywords and phrases: No School No Pool; swimming pool health; swimming pools in remote communities; education health swimming pool; indigenous education health; aboriginal education participation attendance; indigenous school attendance; indigenous water safety program.

The information found from the literature review was broken into the following sections:

- Water safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- School participation and engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth
- Benefits of pools in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Promotion

## Issues identified in the literature:

### Water safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Water safety has been identified as a major issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people<sup>2</sup> who are as much as four times more likely to die from drowning than the rest of the Australian population<sup>3</sup>. The number of unintentional drowning deaths has been found to be disproportionate to overall population levels<sup>5</sup>. Although drowning represents 3% of all injury deaths in Australia, the victim was recorded as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in 4.6% of cases in 2003-04<sup>5</sup>. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represent just 2.5% of the total Australian population<sup>6</sup>. It should also be noted that injury is consistently under-reported for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people due to the under-identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status<sup>5</sup>.

The incidence of death or hospitalisation from drowning is also much higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living in remote areas compared to those living in metropolitan areas of Australia<sup>5</sup>. The risk of dying due to drowning is an estimated 1.9 times greater for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males living in remote areas, and 10.5 times greater for females compared to their counterparts from other areas<sup>2</sup>. Those living in remote or very remote communities represent 24% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

High injury mortality rates are not a problem unique to the Australian indigenous population – indigenous peoples in Canada, North America and New Zealand are also known to have some of the highest rates of injury<sup>5</sup>.

The incidence of drowning death in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is greatest for children under five years of age and for those aged 25-34 years<sup>7</sup>. This is similar to the drowning patterns for Australia as a whole. A report on Injury Prevention Activity Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Project recommends 'That injury prevention and safety strategies explore the potential for working with the large group of younger people in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society through educational activities'<sup>5</sup>.

Studies in recreational water use in remote communities demonstrate that the location of water-related activities is also a safety issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Cooperative Research Centre for Water Quality and Treatment reports that children in remote communities without community swimming pools 'will find anywhere to swim', including water sources such as creeks, rivers, waterholes and dams<sup>8</sup>. It was reported that children even elect to swim in unlikely water sources such as sewerage ponds, roadwork excavation sites and wheelie bins<sup>8</sup>. Many of these water sources are often a distance from the community and all present serious water safety concerns in terms of supervision, risks present and the availability of assistance. Hazardous water conditions such as rips, tides, contaminated water or debris in the water are also of concern for health and safety<sup>8</sup>.

In contrast to the general Australia population, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are more likely to drown in lakes than the ocean, the site of the highest proportion of drowning deaths for all Australians<sup>7</sup>. The rate of drowning in swimming pools is higher for all Australians than for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, however reduced exposure of the latter should be taken into consideration<sup>9</sup>.

Water safety was identified by the Australian Water Safety Council (AWSC) as an important issue for the safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. To address this, the AWSC recommends

that 'Access and availability of facilities, water safety programs and services be appropriately increased to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' <sup>2</sup>.

Aboriginal Water Safety Projects currently or previously in operation include <sup>2 10 11</sup>:

- Northern Territory Remote Pools Project (RLSSA NT 2004- )
- Drowning Prevention Program for Aboriginal Health Workers throughout Rural and Remote Western Australia (RLSSA WA 2002-01)
- Remote Aboriginal Swimming Pools Project (RLSSA WA 2000- )
- SLSQ Indigenous Skill Development Project (2003)
- SLSQ Indigenous Rookie Lifeguard Program (2002- )
- Indigenous Surfing Program (Surfing Victoria 2002- ).
- Swimming Victoria Indigenous Swimming Program

#### Snapshot

- The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drowning rate is up to four times higher than that of the general Australian population.
- The risk of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders drowning in remote areas is 1.9 times higher for males and 10.5 times higher for females than for their counterparts in metropolitan areas of Australia.
- As with the general Australian population, those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged less than five years and 25-34 years are at greatest risk of drowning.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in remote communities will swim in nearly any available water source, with serious implications for health and safety.
- The water safety needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be met through the provision of facilities and water safety programs and services.

## School participation and engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students have poorer rates of attendance and educational outcomes than their non-indigenous counterparts<sup>12</sup>. The Department of Education, Sciences and Training's (DEST) National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2004 examined issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students over the 2001-2004 quadrennium. Over this period there was<sup>12</sup>:

- A 17% increase in the overall number of enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;
- A small improvement in apparent retention rates; in 2004 the apparent year 7/8 to year 12 retention rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was 39.8% (up from 36.4% in 2000). The 2004 figure was the best on record however it comes in contrast to the 2004 apparent retention rate for non-indigenous students of 76.9%;
- A small improvement in attendance rates however these were consistently lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students than the general student population.

The DEST National Report to Parliament does not aggregate data in its analysis of school attendance rates. It does show, however, that across the various Australian government and non-government educational systems in 2004, the attendance rate for primary school-aged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students ranged from approximately 65-90% on average, whereas comparative rates for non-indigenous students were consistently above 90%. Primary school attendance rates are greater than those for secondary school students. These figures are significant as 'It is widely acknowledged that consistent school attendance is essential for educational success and that the high incidence of absenteeism among Indigenous students leads to lower standards of academic achievement'.<sup>12</sup>

According to the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 'Most Indigenous students, regardless of their completion year, leave school poorly prepared relative to their non-Indigenous counterparts. These outcomes limit the post-school options and life choices of Indigenous students, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of social and economic disadvantage'<sup>13</sup>.

There are considerable gaps in educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in comparison to all Australian students, with the percentage of students reaching the national benchmarks for literacy and numeracy between 10 and 30 percentage points lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders<sup>12</sup>. These gaps tend to increase with the age of students, and a significantly smaller number of all students living in very remote areas of Australia reach the national benchmarks for literacy and numeracy than those in metropolitan and provincial areas. It should be noted, however, that in 2004 more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reached the national benchmarks than ever before and in all but one case, gaps in outcomes were at their smallest ever.<sup>12</sup>

Poorer attendance rates and school performance in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has been attributed to a number of factors: personal/family issues; the frustration and low self-esteem of students arising out of poor performance; and cultural factors such as the mobility and transience of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities<sup>14 15</sup>. Increasingly however, the literature looks to the alienation of some students as a result of structural and attitudinal issues within the schooling system itself. Poor attendance rates may relate to the 'inadequate pre-and-in service training of teachers and their unpreparedness for teaching in a cross-cultural, bilingual situation; poor teacher/student relationships<sup>15</sup>; or they may 'represent failure of the school ethos to respect and validate cultural and self identity, and to supply experiences that are relevant to life's circumstances'<sup>14</sup>.

Considering the above, the issue of student engagement has become fundamental to educational discourse on improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Forty percent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is under 15 year of age, thus is it imperative that indigenous education remains a priority of government. The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs recommends in its report on Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008 that the pace of change be accelerated 'by *engaging* Indigenous children and young people in learning...engagement will not occur, or be sustained, unless Indigenous education is 'built in' to become an integral part of core business'<sup>13</sup>. Thus, whole of school and whole of community commitment is necessary to address attendance problems, as is the development of a school environment which encourages active learning<sup>16</sup>. Curricula must be culturally inclusive and sensitive. In developing strategies to improve attendance and educational outcomes, it must be reinforced that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students 'are not homogeneous: they reflect the cultural, social and economic diversity of the communities in which they live'<sup>13</sup>. This recognition of diversity demands that strategies be flexible and expand beyond the confines of the classroom to enlist school and community support.

A recent study on a community-driven preventive youth initiative in the Northern Territory demonstrated that<sup>17</sup>:

In remote Aboriginal communities where a minority of youth attends school, interventions targeting those inside and outside school are needed. Activities such as sport and recreation programmes are valued by community members and by service providers. Such programmes provide opportunities to engage youth with family, school and the community generally, and for informal health promotion.

Incorporating sport and recreation into educational practice can therefore provide opportunities for student engagement by getting children and the wider community actively involved in the learning process. It has also been found that physical activity behaviours are best established during childhood and that 'Primary schools have an ideal opportunity to encourage the development of positive attitudes and practices towards leading an active lifestyle via the delivery of quality PE [physical education]'<sup>18</sup>.

It also has the potential to simultaneously address other health needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. As already highlighted, water safety is one of the principal public health concerns for remote communities. Providing school students with access to swimming pools and associated training programs thus represents an opportunity to address both the educational/engagement and water safety needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

#### Snapshot

- Although figures have improved, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have poorer educational outcomes and leave school poorly prepared in comparison to their non-indigenous counterparts
- Year 7/8-12 retention rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are much lower than for the general Australian student population (39.8% and 76.9% respectively in 2004)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school attendance rates are considerably lower than that of their non-indigenous counterparts
- While there are personal and cultural factors that can contribute to these statistics, current educational discourse points to systemic changes needed in the education system that will *engage* students in learning.
- Flexible teaching and learning practices that recognise the cultural diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are needed.
- Incorporating sport and recreation programs into educational practice is one way to address this.

## Benefits of pools in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Swimming pools can have a wide range of health, social and economic benefits for both individuals and communities in rural and remote areas. The swimming pool is a community facility that provides opportunities for exercise, employment and training, and is a site for community interaction<sup>19</sup>. While there are many reports of the health benefits of swimming pools, the social and economic gains are less well-documented.

The most comprehensive study on this issue in remote Aboriginal communities in Australia was completed by the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (TICHR) from 2000 to 2006. The study was conducted in two remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia (Burringurrah and Jigalong) and investigated the impact swimming pools have on child and adolescent health. These communities were selected as they were the first in an environmental health initiative to have their pools open and operational. The first of its kind in Australia, the study compared disease prevalence in children before and after the pools were opened<sup>19</sup>.

### *Health Benefits*

The TICHR study found that regular access to chlorinated pools had a number of health benefits, including a reduction in the prevalence of skin sores (pyoderma), eye problems, and ear disease (otitis media and associated tympanic membrane perforations)<sup>19</sup>.

Skin sores are known to be related to glomerulonephritis (kidney disease) and rheumatic heart disease, both very common in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population<sup>19</sup>. These findings concurred with previous studies which documented significant reductions in the prevalence of pyoderma when children swam at least once a week<sup>20</sup>. In the first three years of the study the incidence of pyoderma dropped from more than 60% to about 20%. Other less prevalent skin infections included abscesses, fungal infections and scabies. In Jigalong between 2001 and 2005 there was a 51% reduction in skin disease<sup>21</sup>.

The prevalence of perforated ear-drums related to otorrhoea in Aboriginal children is also very high and otitis media is the principal cause of deafness in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people<sup>20</sup>. In those communities worst-affected it may impact on more than 50% of children<sup>22</sup>. Alarming, 'Such high rates have not been described consistently in any other population in the world'<sup>22</sup>. Hearing loss associated with ear disease can severely affect child school performance as well as employment opportunities later in life<sup>19</sup>. However, over the course of the study in Jigalong, a 44% decrease in the incidence of ear disease was reported. These results were recorded over periods of sustained swimming pool use<sup>21</sup>.

Trachoma, caused by repeated eye infection is the primary cause of blindness in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities<sup>20</sup>. Face washing is most effective in preventing trachoma and can be aided by swimming in chlorinated pools<sup>20</sup>. Swimming in salt water pools can also act as an equivalent of a nasal and ear washout and it cleans the skin. The TICHR study found a 41% reduction in antibiotic prescriptions in the years following the opening of the swimming pool in Jigalong<sup>21</sup>. Thus, improved hygiene as a result of continued swimming pool use has been shown to have significant benefits in terms of reductions in ear, eye and skin disease. The study also reported a 63% decrease in respiratory diseases between 2001 and 2005<sup>21</sup>.

Swimming pools also provide opportunities for increased physical activity in remote communities; important where changes in lifestyle and diet have made Aboriginal people more susceptible to

conditions such as obesity, Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease<sup>20</sup>. These diseases are all major contributors to high mortality rates in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders<sup>20</sup>.

It must be noted, however, that these benefits can only be realised through sustained pool use. The investigation found that 'Swimming pools in remote Aboriginal communities can assist in reducing the enormous burden of infectious diseases as long as they are well maintained and open for the optimum period each year'<sup>21</sup>. This can become an issue on a number of levels when the transient nature of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is considered. Population mobility is a problem in health interventions such as this, where success hinges upon prolonged contact with the swimming pool<sup>23</sup>. If community members are not present in the community and therefore unable to access the swimming pool for extended periods over the year, the acknowledged health benefits cannot be as effective. As Hall and Sibthorpe caution in their response to the TICHR study, 'Certainly, high mobility is a major issue both for the design of suitable health interventions that are appropriate for a mobile population and for robust evaluation of such interventions'<sup>23</sup>.

### *Economic Benefits*

The installation of swimming pools in remote communities provides new opportunities for employment, training and skills development for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. Pools in communities that operate as part of the Swimming Pool Program in Remote Communities in Western Australia are managed by the Royal Life Saving Society Australia (RLSSA). A report on the program was published by the Education and Health Standing Committee of the Western Australian Legislative Assembly in 2006. The report details how RLSSA 'envisaged that each swimming pool would be managed and maintained by a locally trained individual who would be assisted where possible by other members of the community who would be trained in other disciplines, including first aid (life-saving)'<sup>24</sup>. If operated in this way, swimming pools have the potential to produce a range of employment opportunities.

It is important that any skill development or training scheme associated with the swimming pool is tailored specifically to the members of remote indigenous communities<sup>24</sup>. RLSSA has responded to this need by adapting its training programs for prospective pool managers to become more culturally appropriate and to address the transience of the population, as well as incentives for participation in training schemes<sup>24</sup>. Community collaboration has been vital in this and is essential to its success. In 2005, Victor Bellotti, the first Aboriginal pool manager was employed at Burringurrah pool in WA:

Victor has proved himself to be an efficient operator and a sensational role-model for the local children...As an Aboriginal Australian, Victor has an in-depth understanding and appreciation for the cultural values and traditions of the local people, and is able to provide a delicate balance between the rules and regulations of the facility and the beliefs and activities of the community. Victor has already made his mark on the community with the local children respecting him not only as the Pool Manager but also as an "Uncle" – a term used in respect for a male member of the community<sup>25</sup>.

Beyond pool management, swimming pools also provide training and employment opportunities for swim instructors, lifeguards and ancillary staff (such as cleaners and grounds staff). RLSSA has modified its lifeguard training programs to be more hands-on and accessible for Aboriginal participants<sup>24</sup>. In its evaluation of training schemes, the WA Education and Health Standing Committee report found that 'Swimming pool management training courses are an ideal employment pathway allowing an individual within a remote community to obtain portable work skills and qualifications that can be used in mainstream society'<sup>24</sup>.

The swimming pool can also be used by other organisations within the community (such as, schools, health services, aged care, childcare etc) to support and enhance the provision of their own services. Examples may include incorporating health promotion activities around the pool, such as SLIP SLOP SLAP WRAP, physical rehabilitation and gentle exercise for health and wellbeing, cool down session with sporting groups, and learning exercises such as diving for numbers or racing to make words.

### *Social Benefits*

Swimming pools in remote indigenous communities have the potential to impact on the social character of the community in a variety of ways. In the first instance, swimming pools act as a diversion and provide a recreational alternative to antisocial behaviours which are the major causes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander morbidity and mortality (such as alcohol and other substance misuse)<sup>20</sup>. Pools represent an opportunity to alleviate boredom and for young people to be engaged in the community through teaching and supervising others, organising activities or simply through participation<sup>20</sup>.

There is evidence that participation in community sport and recreation and organised team activities has personal benefits for children such as improved self-esteem and confidence and ability to make new friends<sup>26</sup>. The site of the swimming pool itself can facilitate social gathering and community interaction in a safe and controlled atmosphere<sup>19</sup>. There have been reports of the pool complex being used for school presentations, barbeques, live music and other social activities<sup>19</sup>.

The WA Education and Health Standing Committee report found that cultural barriers are preventing many older community members from using the swimming pools, however 'It would appear though, that as well as time, proactive programs of intervention can accelerate wider pool usage by targeted groups within the community'<sup>24</sup>.

Educational benefits in terms of increases in student attendance have been widely reported, with many community schools implementing a 'No School No Pool' program in conjunction with pool operators<sup>19</sup>. This program is examined later in this paper as a case study of community initiatives addressing water safety issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in remote communities.

#### Snapshot

- Swimming pools can have health, economic and social benefits for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Regular pool use improves the ear, eye and skin health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- Pools provide opportunities for exercise and physical activity.
- Swimming pool facilities create employment, training and skills development opportunities for local communities.
- Swimming pool facilities provide a safe and controlled environment for community recreation and social activities.
- Swimming pools can be integrated into educational practice, with benefits for school attendance levels and the self-esteem of students.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Promotion

Community engagement and support is fundamental to the success of any health promotion initiative directed towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people<sup>27</sup>. Communities must work together with experts and be engaged in decision-making processes so that culturally appropriate and community-directed models for health promotion are developed<sup>27</sup>.

Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTAR) identifies a number of factors common to successful health promotion programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people<sup>28</sup>:

- the majority work from the 'bottom-up', rather than 'top-down' and are developed locally, driven by community-identified priorities;
- Most adapt known health promotion methodologies to ensure local relevance;
- Most are dependent on the support and knowledge of community Elders.

Essentially, according to ANTAR, successful health promotion initiatives 'show that improved health outcomes are less likely to come from miracle cures or imposed new treatment regimes than from the ability of Indigenous people to determine their own futures and be accountable for decisions impacting on their own communities'<sup>28</sup>. This has been shown to be true for a wide range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health programs, from those promoting nutrition and family and sexual health, to those that target mental health, substance misuse and violence<sup>28</sup>.

Similar themes run consistently through recent literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health promotion; 'Health promotion for Indigenous people must take into account culture, diversity within the populations; socio-economic circumstances; languages and dialects; geographic location and the consequences of colonisation'<sup>27</sup>. It is only through the active participation of communities in the development of health promotion initiatives that each of these factors can be effectively addressed. Thus, community support is essential to the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health promotion<sup>27</sup>.

Working with schools to promote health has been shown to be beneficial<sup>29</sup>. Although not specific to indigenous communities, the World Health Organization's Health Promoting School (HPS) framework recommends health promotion practice in schools<sup>29</sup>. Linking the curriculum with the school environment and community empowers schools to advocate health promotion initiatives. 'It has been documented to improve a school's physical and social environment; curriculum; teaching and learning methods; and the personal and social development of students'<sup>29</sup>. It can also be effective for capacity building in communities, as health promotion initiatives enhance the knowledge, skills and resources available to schools<sup>29</sup>.

The same principles can be applied to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, where the school can become a site for community interaction and support to improve the health and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

### Snapshot

- Community engagement and support is fundamental to the success of any health promotion initiative directed towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Experts should engage and work with the community to address community-identified priorities.
- Health promotion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must take into account the culture and diversity of populations.
- Working with schools can be beneficial for promoting health initiatives to the wider population and for capacity building in schools themselves.

## Issues

### Issue 1: Drowning rate

The drowning rate among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is deeply concerning; however, little is known about the circumstances in which they drown. Further research is needed so that this information can inform the development of effective drowning prevention strategies.

The unintentional drowning death of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people occurs at a rate disproportionate to overall population levels<sup>5</sup>. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are up to four times more likely to die from drowning than the general Australian population<sup>3</sup>. As is the case with the rest of the Australian population, those at greatest risk of drowning are aged under 5 years and between 25-34 years of age<sup>7</sup>. This risk increases with geographical remoteness<sup>5</sup>, where children tend to see all accessible water sources as an opportunity to swim, with dangerous implications for health and water safety<sup>8</sup>. Drowning prevention is therefore a matter that demands the urgent attention of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

As an identified at-risk group, targeted education and intervention strategies must be considered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities so that the incidence of drowning can be reduced or eradicated. This means that 'Access and availability of facilities, water safety programs and services must be appropriately increased to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities', as recommended by the National Water Safety Plan 2004-2007<sup>2</sup>. Water safety education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is essential for the development of the water safety foundation skills that will prepare them for a lifetime of interaction in and around the water.

These foundation skills include<sup>30</sup>:

- Water safety knowledge (understanding dangers, rules for behaviour, safely helping others)
- Water confidence (water familiarisation, buoyancy, mobility and body orientation, propulsion and stroke exploration, stroke development)
- Survival skills (knowledge of survival strategies and techniques, judgement of risk, swimming skills to be used in an emergency, ability to use buoyant aids and personal floatation devices, physical endurance)
- Safe entries and exits (assessing the area, choosing safe methods, depth and condition awareness)
- Elementary swimming skills

In order to address high and disproportionate drowning rates, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and water safety organisations need to work together to ensure that all children have access to water safety programs that provide opportunities for foundation skills development. Targeted education and intervention strategies are fundamental to achieving this goal.

#### Snapshot

- More information is needed about the circumstances in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders drown so that effective drowning prevention strategies can be developed.
- The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drowning rate of is up to four times higher than that of the general Australian population.
- The risk of drowning is higher in remote areas than metropolitan and regional areas.
- As with the general Australian population those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged less than five years and between 25-34 years are at greatest risk of drowning.
- Water safety organisations and remote communities must consider targeted education and intervention strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Water safety education must include the development of foundation aquatic skills.
- **Recommendation: Further research is undertaken into the circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drowning and into possible effective drowning prevention strategies.**

## Issue 2: Access to water safety programs

In the wider community, a number of existing programs target the provision of foundation aquatic skills. These programs, when applied in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, can help develop water safety skills. Often however, the need also arises to incorporate these programs into larger projects which work to provide communities with the infrastructure to further develop foundation aquatic skills.

Water safety programs targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in rural and remote communities currently in operation include the following:

- The Nauiyu Aquatic Recreation project (RLSSA NT) aims to increase levels of physical activity and community recreation using the community swimming pool<sup>31</sup>.
- The Indigenous Drowning Prevention Project (RLSSA WA) aims to introduce the Swim and Survive Program within Indigenous groups in Western Australia<sup>32</sup>.
- The Northern Territory Remote Pools Project (RLSSA NT) is a remote pool support service which conducts safety and management audits, provides telephone support to pool managers, facilitates conferences and other network development activities for remote pool managers and provides support to government (e.g. advice on building of pools)<sup>11</sup>. In 2008 the project is operational in the remote communities of Areyonga, the Daly River, Maningrida, Nguiu, Ngukurr, Pirlangimpi, Santa Teresa, Wadeye and Yuendumu.
- The Swimming Victoria Indigenous Swimming Program aims to integrate swimming programs in rural areas, including the integration of developed athletes into the mainstream Swimming Victoria Development Program<sup>10</sup>.
- The Remote Aboriginal Swimming Pools Project (RLSSA WA) aims 'to reduce drowning, increase physical activity, reduce other health related issues and promote community cohesion in select Aboriginal communities through the provision of appropriate managed swimming pool facilities'<sup>34</sup>. In 2008 the project is operational in three remote communities in Western Australia (Jigalong, Yandeyarra and Burringurrah) and under development at two sites (Warmun and Bidyadanga).

These programs each work to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in rural and remote areas have access to swimming pools and therefore opportunities to develop foundation aquatic and water safety skills. Currently they focus on the Northern Territory and Western Australia as these have the highest proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote and very remote areas. In the Northern Territory, 81% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population lives in remote or very remote communities, and in Western Australia this figure stands at 41%<sup>6</sup>. This is in comparison to the national average of 24% of all Aboriginal and Torres Islanders living in remote or very remote communities.

Given the concerning drowning rate among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the known benefits of swimming pools in remote communities, it is important that all have access to pools and the water safety programs they operate. Considering that aquatics is a lifetime recreation activity, it is important to ensure that children have access to water safety programs from as early an age as possible, and that follow-up programs reinforce these skills for older community groups later in life. If implemented in this way, high quality programs can produce positive outcomes for water safety practice, as well as other health, social and economic benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

#### Snapshot

- Water safety programs targeted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote communities provide opportunities for the development of foundation aquatic skills.
- These programs are often incorporated into larger infrastructure development projects.
- Aquatics is a lifetime recreation activity, therefore children must have access to water safety programs from as early an age as possible and community members must be provided with access to follow-up programs that reinforce these skills throughout later life.
- **Recommendation: All remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have access to swimming pool facilities.**
- **Recommendation: New and effective water safety programs are developed to target the specific needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.**

### Issue 3: Efficacy of water safety programs

The availability of programs does not necessarily guarantee successful outcomes. There has been no comprehensive evaluation of the efficacy of existing water safety programs, either as drowning prevention initiatives or as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health promotion initiatives. Such a study would help to identify effective practices and areas for potential development. However, in the meantime, water safety service providers must ensure that they educate and involve local community members in addressing their water safety needs.

The Injury Prevention Activity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Project Report Vol II provides a model for evaluating injury prevention initiatives. A project can be seen to be working if:

- It is achieving a reduction in injury
- It receives positive feedback from others
- There are observable positive effects
- It lays the groundwork for formation of partnerships between project and community service providers <sup>35</sup>

It has also been noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health promotion initiatives work best if developed for and by the communities themselves, based on community-driven priorities <sup>29</sup>. They must take into account culture and diversity and work to ensure that community members are engaged at every level of the process <sup>29</sup>. It has been found elsewhere that, 'If community elders do not support the project, then no one will participate'; and projects subsequently fail <sup>36</sup>. Successful health promotion initiatives use existing methodologies but these should be adapted to remain relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities <sup>28</sup>.

Each of the water safety projects outlined in the previous section uses programs such as the RLSSA Swim and Survive program to teach foundation aquatic skills to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. However, no evidence has been found of water safety programs being developed or adapted to meet the water safety needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people specifically. Given that current discourse on health promotion clearly articulates that programs should be developed at all levels by, or in conjunction with, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, water safety program providers should consider adapting their services to make them more effective for this section of the population <sup>24</sup>.

#### *Case study: A community-developed water safety program*

The Nauiyu Aquatic Recreation Project prioritises community involvement in its every day operations. Funded by the Department of Health and Ageing through the Building Healthy Communities in Remote Areas Initiative, the Royal Life Saving Society established a community development model and worked in partnership with the community to implement this program. Its key strategy is to work at the local level with government, health services, schools, non-government organisations, interest groups and aquatic facilities, as well as external government and non-government agencies, to improve levels of physical activity and community recreation. This involves <sup>37</sup>:

- Community engagement, including mechanisms such as a Community Recreation Committee;
- Community participation, providing a range of structured programs, recreational activities and community events;
- Employability, skills and training to build community capacity to manage and utilise the swimming pool beyond the project period;

- Communication to ensure that the community understands the health and social benefits of physical activity and participation in project activities.

RLSSA recognises that vital to the project's success is the employment of a local project officer, engagement of the community through the creation of a community recreation committee, and the support systems provided by national and local branch project managers<sup>31</sup>.

As such, 'Community members are more likely to support the programs and activities conducted at the facility if they feel a sense of ownership of the facility'<sup>36</sup>. If water safety programs are to address key issues in drowning prevention and foundation aquatic skills development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote communities, then they must work to ensure that service providers build supportive relationships with the communities themselves.

#### Snapshot

- The availability of water safety programs does not necessarily guarantee successful outcomes.
- Further research is needed to identify effective practice in water safety service provision and areas for potential development.
- Water safety service providers must ensure that they educate and involve local community members in addressing their water safety needs.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health promotion initiatives should be based on community-driven priorities and be sensitive to the cultural and linguistic diversity of the community.
- Targeted water safety programs will produce better results for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.
- **Recommendation: Existing water safety programs are adapted to become more effective in targeting the specific needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.**

## Issue 4: Use of current infrastructure

Swimming pools in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities come in a range of types and sizes, from wading pools to full-sized Olympic pools, both indoor and open air. In at least one community there are as many as four pools of varying sizes, while many others just have one<sup>8</sup>.

The opening hours of pools vary greatly from community to community. Some are open all-year round, however many only operate during the warmer months of the year. Pools are open mostly in the afternoons, although several also operate throughout the day<sup>8</sup>.

While not all remote communities have access to swimming pools, those that do use them for a range of activities. Swimming pools in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are used recreationally by school groups and for swimming lessons and carnivals. Where possible, pool facilities are also used for other recreational activities such as school presentations, barbecues, live music and other social activities<sup>19</sup>.

Currently the swimming pools are used predominantly by children<sup>19</sup>. Pools are seen as a safe place for children to go for enjoyment and recreation, and as a site where they can also gain from associated health and fitness benefits. By contrast, very few adults use the pool. It has been reported that cultural sensitivity and peer pressure amongst some adolescents mean that many older community members are reluctant to use the pool or participate in pool-associated activities<sup>24</sup>. However, programs that target specific groups within the community can be successful in encouraging them to use the pool and participate in pool-related activities<sup>24</sup>.

There are also issues in the construction of pool infrastructure that can affect accessibility for all community members. In pools where the only method of entry is by jumping, diving or climbing down a ladder, entry can be difficult or impossible for less mobile people, such as the elderly, disabled and obese<sup>19</sup>. Thus, design of swimming pools is an important factor in making pool facilities available to all community members.

The benefits of swimming pools are plentiful; communities must work to ensure that all members have access to and are comfortable with the available infrastructure so that all have the opportunity to use pool facilities. More information is needed about what activities and purposes different community groups use the pool for, or would like to use the pool for, so that potential benefits can be optimised for all pool users. An improved understanding of the cultural factors that deter Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from using pool facilities is also necessary so that programs that cater specifically to their needs can be developed.

The building of a community pool is not a cheap exercise. This coupled with the ongoing maintenance and staffing costs make it a significant asset for the community. However, in many cases, this asset is not used as extensively by the community as it could be, generally due to the limited accessibility of the pool (due to factors such as restricted opening hours or seasonal pool closures). Major improvements to the pool infrastructure itself could address this, such as the provision of pool heating, shaded areas or a small wading pool for toddlers. When coupled with programs for a range of ages and experience levels, the use of the pool can be significantly enhanced. These improvements can not only affect the accessibility, but also the overall value of the pool.

A major audit of pools in remote communities would provide important information about the number of pools, current uses of pools, opening hours/periods and the various skills of staff. This

information would be extremely helpful in developing new strategies to most effectively utilise swimming pool facilities and infrastructure.

#### Snapshot

- The type, size, number and opening hours of swimming pools vary greatly in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Swimming pools are used for school activities, swimming lessons and swimming carnivals, and other recreational activities often take place within the pool premises.
- Pools are used predominantly by children.
- Pool design is important in ensuring the pool is physically accessible to most people.
- More should be known about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people use pool facilities, about their specific needs and the cultural factors that affect pool use and preferred pool activities.
- Measures must be taken to ensure that the benefits of swimming pools as a community asset are maximised.
- **Recommendation: A national registry of pools in remote communities is developed, including number of pools, current uses, opening hours/periods and skills of staff.**
- **Recommendation: Governments and communities provide ongoing support and resourcing commitments to swimming pool facilities to maximise their accessibility for all members of the community.**

## Issue 5: A skilled workforce

The installation of swimming pool infrastructure in remote communities creates employment opportunities in terms of pool management, maintenance and supervision. Pool staff members must therefore be appropriately trained in aquatics and/or facilities management. If schools use pool facilities, teaching staff must also have the appropriate qualifications to supervise children in and around the water.

For effective pool operation, several staff are required to carry out essential duties as follows<sup>38</sup>:

- Pool management for safe water quality assurance, water testing, chemical dosing, reporting, financial administration and accountability, problem solving and managing staff
- Pool equipment, cleaning and maintenance
- Pool attendants with life saving and first aid skills
- Shower, toilet and change room cleaners
- Yard cleaner, gardener and rubbish disposal
- Security both when the pool is open and closed
- Medical checkup of users to reduce the risk of infectious diseases being spread

The need for a skilled workforce presents issues for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in terms of the training and retention of staff. Water safety organisations that work with communities to install pools and develop pool programs can provide trained staff members to work as managers and lifeguards in remote pools. However, the high turnover of skilled staff can become a problem in these cases.

The solution, as has been widely acknowledged by water safety organisations, is to train local members of the community in pool management, maintenance and supervision<sup>24 36</sup>. Difficulties can be encountered, however, in eliciting job interest and in the training process. The transience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations can be an issue in gaining the 'long-term' commitment of community members to pool management and lifeguard training programs<sup>24</sup>.

To address this, the focus of Royal Life Saving Society's Remote Aboriginal Swimming Pools Project has been the 'modification of usual RLSS training processes through increased community collaboration'<sup>34</sup>. As with all initiatives directed at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, success hinges on cultural sensitivity and the application, and modification where appropriate, of existing processes so that they work with community structures to achieve outcomes beneficial to the community as a whole.

Where school groups use the pool, community members trained in aquatics and first aid can provide extensive relief for school teachers in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities whose teaching responsibilities are often incredibly demanding. If swimming lessons are conducted regularly by qualified instructors at the pool as part of the school curriculum, teachers are given a break and the opportunity to focus on the other demands of their role. As such, training community members in aquatics can be advantageous for the community in manners beyond the obvious benefits of skills development and the creation of employment opportunities.

Communities must make resourcing commitments to ensure that swimming pools remain open and operational as much as possible. The construction of a swimming pool is a considerable investment and represents a significant community asset. Hence, to utilise this asset most effectively, funding must be dedicated to resourcing and training swimming pool staff in the long term.

#### Snapshot

- Several staff are needed to successfully operate and maintain swimming pools in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- These staff members must be adequately trained in aquatics and/or facilities management.
- In remote communities the training and retention of skilled staff can be difficult. Training programs should therefore be adapted and applied to suit the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- If qualified community members instruct school groups at the pool during school hours, teaching resources are made available to focus on other educational demands.
- Swimming pool facilities must be adequately resourced to ensure the availability of trained staff so that pools remain open and operational as much as possible.
- **Recommendation: Local community members are provided with opportunities to undertake skills development in aquatics, pool management and pool maintenance to help ensure communities are self-sufficient in operating and maintaining swimming pool facilities and associated programs.**

## Issue 6: Benefits of pools

The swimming pool is a community asset. Beyond providing access to swimming facilities and water safety programs, there are a wealth of health, economic and social benefits associated with swimming pools in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. At present no information exists to clearly articulate optimum levels of pool use which maximise the benefits of pools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote communities. Nevertheless, communities must ensure that the pool and pool services are available as much as possible so that potential benefits can be exploited in full. These benefits include <sup>19</sup>:

### *Health Benefits*

- Improved child ear health (reducing the prevalence of otitis media and related tympanic membrane perforations)
- Improved child eye health (reducing the prevalence of trachoma, the leading cause of blindness in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people <sup>20</sup>)
- Improved child skin health (reducing the prevalence of skin disease: pyoderma, scabies and related skin sores);
- Opportunities for fitness and exercise for all members of the population, particularly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at risk of lifestyle diseases such as obesity, Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

### *Economic Benefits*

- Training pathways and employment opportunities in pool management
- Training pathways and employment opportunities in lifesaving skills.

### *Social Benefits*

- Pool premises can be a safe, friendly and controlled environment for community members of all ages to interact and participate in activities
- Pool premises provide a space for community interaction and activities such as carnivals, barbeques, concerts and performances and school functions
- Improved school attendance levels (if pool is used as part of school program or a 'No School No Pool' attendance program)
- Improved self-esteem and confidence of children participating in group and team activities

<sup>26</sup>

Considering these benefits, the task of communities is to ensure that they are maximised for the gain of the community as a whole. There are a number of factors involved this:

- Access – pools must remain open for as many hours each day and as many months of the year as possible to facilitate regular access for community members;
- Resources – funds must be available to adequately staff and maintain the pool throughout the year
- A cross-community network of pool facilities and programs - some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are transient. Pools must therefore be made available in as many communities as possible so that access to pool facilities for mobile populations is sustained. This is important in taking full advantage of the health benefits of regular pool use. It also helps to ensure that skills developed through pool facilities and training programs are transferrable across communities.

Communities and water safety organisations should work together to explore the possibilities for developing a nationwide program that supports the use of remote pools as a resource for the health, economic and social gain of whole communities.

#### Snapshot

- There are several documented health, economic and social benefits of pools in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- In order that these benefits are exploited to their fullest potential, all community members should have access to swimming pools and associated programs and pools must be open, operational and adequately resourced.
- **Recommendation: The possibilities are explored for the development of a nationwide program which supports the use of remote pools for the health, economic and social benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.**
- **Recommendation: A cross-community network of swimming pools is developed to help the transfer of skills between communities, thus providing mobile populations with opportunities for regular pool access.**

## Issue 7: Linking water to educational practices

There are two elements involved in linking water to educational practice. The first uses the pool as part of school attendance strategies, i.e. the 'No School No Pool' program whereby students who do not attend school are restricted from using the pool. The second element relates to the use of the pool to help achieve general educational outcomes.

Water safety and poor school attendance are both issues of great concern to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people drown at a rate nearly four times that of the general Australian population<sup>2</sup>. School attendance levels are consistently lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students than for their non-indigenous counterparts<sup>12</sup>. Linking water and pool facilities to educational practice therefore presents a unique opportunity for communities to address both issues simultaneously so that programs become mutually beneficial for health, safety and educational outcomes.

The 'No School No Pool' program operates in several remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia. When applied appropriately, it has the potential to positively affect school attendance levels by making sure students are aware that as a consequence for not attending school they will be denied access to the swimming pool. In general, schools send a list of names of students who have not attended school to the local pool each day, and these students are not permitted entry. Ideally, this encourages students to attend school regularly. However, as is discussed in the case study that follows this section, there are a number of factors necessary for the successful implementation of the program, including access to the pool, community support and commitment, and the ethical implementation of the program.

It has been widely reported that key to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander attendance rates is the engagement of students in the learning experience<sup>12 13 39</sup>. Flexible learning strategies are important to actively involve students in the learning process. Swimming pools and water-related activities have been shown to have benefits for the self-esteem of students, therefore incorporating pool activities into the school curriculum has the potential to positively affect student attitudes and willingness to participate in their schooling.

Incorporating sport and recreation into educational practice can therefore provide opportunities for student engagement by getting children and the wider community actively involved in the learning process. Giving students access to the pool during school hours has the potential to be educationally beneficial, whilst regular pool access can address other health and safety needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, as discussed in Issue 6. Although some schools already use the pool for swimming lessons and the development of foundation aquatic skills, there is little evidence as yet of the pool being incorporated into the general school curriculum.

The pool is an educational resource that can be utilised more extensively than this. Teachers can integrate water-based games and activities into learning, which not only familiarise students with their aquatic environment, but also activate their minds. For example, spelling and word recognition games could be integrated into entry/exit and retrieval activities; or number and multiplication tasks could be incorporated into racing or diving activities. A creative approach is needed so that children enjoy their time at school whilst also achieving important educational outcomes.

Further research would be helpful to indicate the exact types of educational programs that can be delivered at the pool. Suggested or proven paradigms for flexible teaching practices would be of tremendous use in encouraging schools to adapt old or adopt new learning strategies. The consensus exists that more needs to be done to engage students in the learning process; what

remains is to provide teachers and administrators with valid alternatives so that they can begin to develop strategies that enact recommendations for innovative teaching practice.

#### Snapshot

- Water and educational practice can be linked by using swimming pools as part of a broader attendance strategy (i.e. 'No School No Pool') or by incorporating the pool into general teaching and learning practices.
- Flexible teaching and learning practices are important to engage students in their education; involving the swimming pool in teaching represents a significant opportunity for this.
- Linking water and educational practices can be beneficial for both educational and health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote communities.
- Materials which outline a variety of tested methods and practices which incorporate the pool into the school curriculum should be made widely available to schools in remote communities.
- **Recommendation: Further research is undertaken into strategies that incorporate swimming pools into teaching and learning practice, helping schools and communities to implement new and flexible policy.**

## Issue 8: Engagement (community education) of community in water safety

Engagement of the community has been identified as essential to the success of initiatives directed towards the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. Thus, before the problem of water safety can be effectively treated, all sectors of the community must have a good understanding of the issues involved. This includes local council, schools, healthcare services, pool operators and parents. Water safety organisations should be active in remote communities with pools, working to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are aware of the need to establish water safety as a priority and develop programs in accordance with this.

To ensure the local community is engaged, water safety organisations should understand the need to work cooperatively with existing community structures. This involves ensuring that approaches to community development take into account culture and diversity and are relevant to communities. Working with community elders has been identified as essential to the success of health promotion initiatives<sup>28</sup>, so working with elder groups and councils must be prioritised.

Water safety organisations should provide opportunities for open discussion of water safety issues within communities. In September 2007, the Royal Life Saving Society Australia held a Remote Indigenous Pools Health Promotion and Operations Workshop in Darwin<sup>37</sup>. The workshop brought community leaders together to discuss water safety promotion and water safety programs, and how each could work in the community. Its primary aim was to engage the community in 'Maximising the health, social and economic benefits of swimming pools in remote indigenous communities'<sup>37</sup>. The workshop was well received and successfully engaged communities in the issues of water safety and swimming pool operation<sup>37</sup>.

Initiatives such as the Remote Indigenous Pools Workshop provide water safety organisations with the opportunity to showcase successful strategies and programs for improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander water safety and provide a forum for local leaders to consider how these strategies can best be implemented in their community.

Where swimming pool infrastructure is in place, water safety organisations must sustain a strong and supportive relationship with pool operators and other appropriate bodies to ensure that the standards of program delivery are maintained and that water safety remains a community priority.

### Snapshot

- Community engagement is essential to the success of initiatives directed at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.
- To ensure community engagement in water safety issues, water safety organisations should be active in working cooperatively with and supporting existing community bodies.
- Water safety organisations should continue to run water safety workshops which involve community leaders and engage them in the process of water safety strategy development.
- **Recommendation: Water safety organisations work in partnership with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to develop relevant and culturally appropriate programs. Whole of community support is essential to the success of these programs.**

## Case Study: Attendance programs using the pool ('No School No Pool')

The following case study brings together each of the issues identified above in the implementation of a school program which uses the pool as a means for motivating children to attend school. It demonstrates how the pool can be integrated into daily school practice, providing opportunities to combine learning, engagement and recreation.

School attendance has been identified as an important issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. Flexible learning initiatives are essential to addressing this. 'No School No Pool', as it is commonly known, is a program that has been introduced in recent years to remote communities across Australia as a means of encouraging school participation. Until now there has been no comprehensive evaluation of the program and its effects, or the manner in which it has been received in the community. The Royal Life Saving Society Australia undertook in November-December 2007 to address this gap. To discern the efficacy of 'No School No Pool' as a case study in addressing water safety issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in rural and remote Australia, dialogue should be established with the operators of the program itself. In this study, discussions with school staff sought to elucidate if and how 'No School No Pool' operates in remote communities in the Northern Territory, and what effects it may have on schooling, attendance and water safety.

The study found a diverse range of opinion about the program; both supportive and critical from the school teachers and principals interviewed. This study reinforces both the fundamental importance of community support to the success of health promotion initiatives and the delicacy of treating the problem of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander non-attendance in schools.

### Aims

- To discover what 'No School No Pool' means to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- To find out if, how and why the program runs on a day to day basis
- To identify how program delivery differs from community to community
- To examine how different community groups work together to deliver the program
- To identify the implications of 'No School No Pool' for student behaviour, attendance and the development of water safety skills and knowledge
- To explore any potential models for the successful implementation of the program

### Methods

This research is of an interpretive nature and was based on information gathered from semi-structured interviews conducted over the telephone over the period 3 December – 14 December 2007. Thirteen interviews ranging from 5-25 minutes each were conducted with members of primary and secondary school staff in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Eight of the thirteen interviews were conducted with the School Principal, three with the Deputy Principal, and two with other members of teaching staff.

Each community was known by the Royal Life Saving Society Australia to have or be in the process of building community swimming pools. RLSSA had an already-established relationship with each of the communities investigated. The study was limited to 11 remote communities in the Northern Territory in order to provide a discreet population with similar circumstances in terms of legislative

jurisdiction. This was to help ensure that variances in community background and structure did not influence the consistency of results.

## Results

Of the thirteen respondents, all were aware of the concept of 'No School No Pool'. Five reported the program, or some variation of it, to be currently in operation in their community. Two had plans to implement it in the future upon completion of construction of their community pool. Of those that said 'No School No Pool' did not operate, four had run the program in the past and two had never implemented it.

### *Communities where 'No School No Pool' operates*

Of the five cases in which 'No School No Pool' was operational, three ran the program under the title 'No School No Pool'. Two had no official name for the policy, although one stressed that the school did not like the negative connotations of 'No School No Pool':

*'...Rather than saying to the kids, 'No School No Pool', we like to see the pool as a reward for the ones that do attend.'*<sup>1</sup>

In all but one case where 'No School No Pool' is in operation, the program applies to pool use out of school hours. The school records student attendance each day and provides community pool operators with a list of absent students each afternoon. Those students not in attendance that day are not allowed entry into the pool that afternoon. This is enforced by pool operators or sport and recreation officers, who also supervise pool use out of school hours. In one case a teacher sometimes monitors the enforcement of the policy, but otherwise this remains the responsibility of pool operators. In general, where pool use is associated with school activities or 'No School No Pool', students are not charged for use of the pool.

At one school, 'No School No Pool' applies to pool use during school hours and therefore affects students who arrive late to school. There is no specific rule outlined, however those denied pool access on the day the interview was conducted *'were more than half an hour late'*<sup>2</sup>. Each day they arrive late these students are asked to sit aside and observe as their classmates participate in swimming activities. Out of school hours the pool is open to the whole community.

In another school, the names of students who attend but continue to misbehave in class even after lunchtime detention are also added to the list of those not allowed pool access after school.

Improving attendance rates was the principal reason in each community for introducing 'No School No Pool'. All reported the program to be effective in achieving this, both in communities where school attendance was identified as an issue of great concern, and in those where it did not pose such a problem. In all cases, 'No School No Pool' operated in conjunction with other programs to address attendance issues, as is detailed later.

As one respondent described when explaining its effects on school attendance:

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<sup>1</sup> Interview no. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Interview no. 2.

*'...it's a bit of a carrot I suppose...Everybody gets something out of the pool. It's open after school and on weekends too so the kids don't get bored.'*<sup>3</sup>

Respondents reported that benefits of 'No School No Pool' for children, beyond improved attendance rates include:

- Improvements in classroom behaviour
- Improvements in swimming ability, fitness and water safety competence
- Improved self-esteem
- Improvements in hygiene and skin health of children

On two occasions the program was reported to be of benefit in providing an alternative place to swim to other, often crocodile-infested waterways.

'No School No Pool' was largely seen as positive by respondents in communities where the program operates. Issues identified include:

- Complaints of parents at restrictions being placed on their children, particularly if they thought their child had attended school.
- The need for whole of community support in running 'No School No Pool'; this includes the support of parents, teachers, schools, community councils and wider community members.

The pool is used for swimming carnivals at least once a year in each community and in all but one of these cases the community pool was also used during school hours as part of the school program. Students participate in basic swimming lessons one to three times a week, supervised by teachers and sport and recreation officers. One community operates its lessons in coordination with Royal Life Saving Society Australia NT. All supervisors are trained in aquatics, except in one case where teachers were described as '*capable*'<sup>4</sup>; that is, their basic water safety skills were considered sufficient for the conditions.

### *Communities which intend to introduce 'No School No Pool' in the future*

Two respondents anticipated that their school would gain access to a community pool within the next year and in both cases 'No School No Pool' would become a part of daily school practice. For one community, the implementation of 'No School No Pool', or rather a locally interpreted, 'Yes School Yes Pool', was one of the conditions of the original Shared Responsibility Agreement with government to install the pool.

In one community, a 'No School No Shop' policy was already in place, based on daily attendance as 'No School No Pool' would be. Both interviewees expected the implementation of the program to have a positive effect on attendance rates and on the health of students. Pool use as part of the school program is planned upon completion of construction. Both schools are in contact with Royal Lifesaving Australia NT to develop plans for future pool use.

One school already had access to a small, recently-repaired pool and in the week leading up to the interview had introduced a 'No School No Pool' policy. This had worked favourably with students quickly realising that absence from school would mean no entry to the pool. However, according to the respondent, this did not necessarily indicate a '*conceptual understanding*'<sup>5</sup> of the program and

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<sup>3</sup> Interview no. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Interview no. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Interview no. 8.

its aims on the part of students. The respondent reported visible improvements in skin health over the one week the small pool had been open.

### *Communities which have previously but no longer run 'No School No Pool'*

Four schools reported having operated 'No School No Pool' in the past. One school used to operate a ticketing system whereby students present at school each day would be given a ticket, and only those with a ticket would be allowed entry to the community pool. Another school only ran the program intermittently and had no fixed policy for enforcement, although *'kids are usually pretty good at dobbing on each other'*<sup>6</sup>. The remaining schools ran 'No School No Pool' by providing pool operators with a list of absentees who were not entitled to enter the pool.

Interviewees in these communities which had discontinued operation of 'No School No Pool' associated this decision with a variety of issues:

- Adequate provision of resources to ensure regular pool operation (opening hours) including pool maintenance
- Retention of qualified staff to manage pool
- Lack of community understanding and support of the program
- Ethical issues related to restricting students access to the pool (health and other benefits of pool use)
- Effective enforcement including staff resourcing (e.g. Lack of incorporation of 'No School No Pool' into broader attendance programs / strategies)

In one community, although 'No School No Pool' had been trialled on a number of occasions, it had never been introduced as official policy as pool operation was extremely irregular. Maintenance and staffing issues meant that the pool was closed much of the year, and although the respondent believed that the program would work if implemented with consistency, this was not a possibility in present circumstances. Resourcing issues at the Council level would first need to be addressed.

The need for qualified staff was identified as another important issue. Respondents believed that training locals in aquatics would address the problem created by the high turnover of skilled staff in remote communities.

In one case students had been charged \$1 for pool entry. This was seen to present a problem in terms of affordability and equality of access to the pool.

Broad-reaching community support was identified as necessary to the success of 'No School No Pool'. The program needs staff willing to follow enforcement through on a daily basis at individual teacher, school and community levels. One respondent felt that the aims and potential benefits of 'No School No Pool' needed to be better advertised to the community so that members could be better informed in their decision to endorse the program or not.

Another respondent reported that the effectiveness of past implementation of 'No School No Pool' had been undermined by other, more urgent priorities of the school. Fighting among students for example, had been an extremely concerning problem which transferred itself to the pool premises during the period the program was enforced. Fighting deterred students from attending both school and the pool, and thus represented an issue that needed to be resolved before the school could consider re-implementing 'No School No Pool'. The lack of support from pool management also presented operational problems.

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<sup>6</sup> Interview no. 11.

Ethical issues surrounding 'No School No Pool' were raised by a number of respondents. One explained that considering the known benefits of pool use, it was unethical to deny access to students and instead dealt a *'double blow'*<sup>7</sup> to students already missing out on parts of their education. Another described 'No School No Pool' as a *'waste of time'*; *'punishment is not the way to get kids to come to school'*<sup>8</sup>. This respondent believed that the program serves only to further alienate those students with the poorest attendance levels, already situated on the fringes of the community. The pool was seen to be a site for family recreation and relaxation rather than as a tool for punishment.

In another case it was reported that the issue of attendance was too complex to be treated by a program such as 'No School No Pool'. Instead, the interviewee believed that students will be enticed to attend if structural changes are implemented in the classroom such that a relevant curriculum is delivered by high quality teachers. Teachers need opportunities to update knowledge and skills, while students will not attend school unless they are interested in the programs being offered.

### *Communities in which 'No School No Pool' has never operated*

Two schools had never implemented 'No School No Pool', nor had immediate plans for introducing the program. In both cases the pool is not open enough to warrant operating the program. In one community this is due to staffing problems, and in the other the pool is closed due to incorrect installation in the first instance. One community had plans during the building stage of the pool to introduce a 'No School No Pool Uncool' policy as an attendance strategy. This has since been sidelined, as community opinion has begun to see the program as unfair to students denied the benefits of pool use.

One respondent felt that seasonal conditions would prevent the program from being effective. The pool is closed for several months of the year over the cooler dry season, therefore 'No School No Pool' is *'hardly a disincentive'*<sup>9</sup> to miss school. Health benefits of the program would be more significant than any impact on attendance if it was to be implemented.

### *Attendance*

All schools operated programs to address attendance other than 'No School No Pool', although in two cases (one which ran 'No School No Pool' and one which did not) school attendance rates were satisfactory enough not to represent an urgent problem for the community. In all others attendance was identified as a high priority.

Nutrition programs, whereby the school provides breakfast or morning tea to students, were in place in most schools. In a similar vein to 'No School No Pool', only those students present at school are entitled to the food provided.

Many schools had Home Liaison or similar officers employed specifically to manage school attendance programs and policy. Duties include:

- Monitoring attendance
- Conducting morning drives/ walks around the community to gather students and bring them to school

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<sup>7</sup> Interview no. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Interview no. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Interview no. 10.

- Daily visits to the homes of students not in attendance

The majority of schools also supported various rewards programs for attendance and good behaviour. Rewards for consistent attendance include:

- Small prizes at the end of the week e.g. iceblocks, Auskick AFL bags, award certificates
- Entitlement to participate in games and other activities at the end of the week
- Entitlement to go on excursions and school trips throughout the school year

A small number of respondents indicated that their school preferred rewards systems, a form of positive reinforcement, to more punitive schemes such as 'No School No Pool'.

In one community a Youth Diversion Group operates to encourage school attendance. In another, the community runs a campaign of television promotions, newsletters, posters and advertisements. In this, the names of students with good attendance rates are publicised, as are the names of those the school would like to see attend more often, in the hope that the community as a whole will get behind the push to get kids to go to school.

### *Pool Use*

Of those with who currently have access to pools, all but one school used the community pool regularly as part of the school program, regardless of whether 'No School No Pool' was in operation. Students use the pool between one and three times a week for school purposes. Where 'No School No Pool' was in place, it applied to afterschool use of the pool.

During school hours students predominantly participate in swimming lessons. Most schools also held swimming carnivals at least once a year. Out of school hours, pool use is largely recreational.

### **Discussion**

Of the thirteen members of school staff interviewed, all had heard of 'No School No Pool' and five reported to be running the program, although it was not named as such in every case.

Interviewees considered that 'No School No Pool' has the potential to be an effective program if integrated correctly into a school's broader attendance strategy. However, results demonstrate that a number of issues need to be addressed for the successful implementation of the program, not least of which is what to do in cooler weather. No matter where or how it is delivered, the concept of 'No School No Pool' must be tailored to meet the specific needs of individual communities.

As one respondent reported, '*...No one policy can be the answer to attendance problems but they all help in their own way*'.<sup>10</sup>

From the interviews, a number of themes were identified and have been addressed as follows:

- 'No School No Pool' as a community priority
- Ethical implementation of 'No School No Pool'
- Use of the pool: Flexible learning and student engagement

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<sup>10</sup> Interview no. 8.

## *'No School No Pool' as a community priority*

'No School No Pool' cannot be successful in isolation. There are a number of key elements that are necessary to its effective implementation. The need for broad-reaching community support was identified as one of these elements. Support is required at school, pool and community levels so that the community as a collective imparts a strong and persistent 'No School No Pool' message to students. Without whole of community endorsement, the message behind the program becomes confusing and/or diluted and cannot as be effective in affecting student behaviour and the decision to go to school. Staff at schools and pools must be willing to enforce the policy, and the community in general must be behind the strong push to get kids in school.

It is therefore necessary that communities ensure that both schools and pools are sufficiently resourced to operate the program continually throughout the school year. At least one member of school staff must be responsible for the program, ensuring that lists of names of students arrive at the pool each afternoon. In at least one interview it was reported that the Home Liaison Officer in charge of attendance policy at the school had too many other demands to be able to enforce 'No School No Pool' with any consistency, thus undermining the effectiveness of the program.

*'...['No School No Pool'] is supposed to operate but it has been so erratic in implementation...the problem for teachers is the huge amount of paperwork, it's so time consuming...it ends up being based on luck for the kids who don't come to school, whether they are allowed into the pool that day or not.'*<sup>11</sup>

If 'No School No Pool' is to be successful, schools must devote time and staffing resources such that the policy applies to all students, every day.

A similar commitment needs to be made on the pool-side of the operation. In the first instance, pools must be appropriately resourced so that they can remain open and accessible to the public for as many months of the year as possible. Problems identified in the interviews that prevent regular pool operation ranged from poor pool maintenance and staffing issues to simple seasonal and weather factors that mean the pool cannot open every month of the year. In one case, 'No School No Pool' could not operate because, *'...the pool isn't just closed, it's also green'*<sup>12</sup>. An open and functioning pool is absolutely necessary to the 'No School No Pool' program.

Appropriately trained staff, whether they are teachers, Sport and Recreation Officers or pool operators, must be available to supervise children in the pool. Resources therefore need to be allocated to train local community members in various aspects of aquatics so that the high turnover of skilled staff common in remote communities does not become problematic for the consistent operation of the program.

'No School No Pool' is at its most effective when supported both financially and in terms of enforcement by parents, teachers, school administration and community councils. Regardless of whether the program is a school or council initiative, or part of a government Shared Responsibility Agreement, community-wide endorsement is essential.

'No School No Pool' only works effectively as an attendance strategy if students themselves actually wish to use the pool. If not, the program becomes redundant. Pool facilities must therefore provide a safe, friendly and enjoyable environment where children want to be. There are factors that lie

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<sup>11</sup> Interview no. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Interview no. 11.

beyond the reaches of school, pool operator or community control that must also be addressed. For example, in the cooler months of the year (as one interviewee indicated) children may have no desire to swim in the cold waters of the pool and in many communities, cooler climates mean that the pool facilities are closed for much of the year. There are a number of measures that potentially address this problem. Pool operators could consider heating the pool or running activities that warm the children up before entering the swimming pool itself. Another option could be to operate 'No School No Pool' in conjunction with other sport and recreation facilities. For example, a 'No School No AFL' system could operate in a similar vein during the months the pool is closed. A combined community response such as this would enable the message about importance of school attendance to be reinforced continually and consistently to students throughout the year.

Whole of community support in endorsing, operating, and enforcing 'No School No Pool' is vital to its success.

### *Ethical implementation of 'No School No Pool'*

While the program may appear simple, in reality there are several factors which make operation complex and affect its effectiveness. A small number of interviewees raised the question of ethics in regard to the implementation of 'No School No Pool'. It was felt that 'No Pool' places severe restrictions on the availability of opportunities for students to access the known benefits of pools.

The issues involved in this vary depending on how 'No School No Pool' operates in each community. In communities where the swimming pool is open only during school hours, students who do not attend cannot use the pool facilities at all. One respondent felt that denying pool access had the potential to further alienate already troubled students by dealing a '*double blow*'<sup>13</sup> to those already missing out on valuable educational experiences in the classroom by not attending.

The consequence is similar in communities where 'No School No Pool' applies to after school use of the pool. In this case absentees are prevented from accessing the benefits of pool use both during and after school. This has also been identified as problematic by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC) *Social Justice Report 2005*<sup>40</sup>. However, HREOC also acknowledges that potential solutions to these concerns do exist in the flexible interpretation of 'No School No Pool'. For example, rather than denying absentees pool access entirely, communities could instead withhold subsidies for pool use from these students. As such they are still able to access the swimming pool and its benefits but families must instead pay for this privilege. In the context of 'No School No Pool' as an element of Shared Responsibility Agreements, the report indicates that 'While this may be a subtle difference, it changes the nature of the program from one that places *restrictions* on communities to one that confers *benefits* on sectors of the community who comply with the commitments contained in the agreement'<sup>40</sup>. However, it should be noted that this example also raises issues in terms of enforcement and equality of access to all students. In the case where families cannot afford pool charges, children would still not be able to gain access to the pool and its benefits.

In the opinion of the authors, the ideal and ethical implementation of 'No School No Pool', would require pools to be open to the public both during the week and on weekends. As such, even if students do not attend school and are prevented from using the pool during the week, opportunities for pool access remain at the weekend. The principal issue here is to balance 'No School No Pool' as a means to motivate children to attend school, whilst also ensuring that all still have some opportunity to use pool facilities.

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<sup>13</sup> Interview no. 3.

Communities and schools must recognise that 'No School No Pool' exists as a concept open to interpretation and development in accordance with individual community needs and priorities. At some schools, rewards systems are perceived to be more effective in encouraging school attendance. In at least one case, the program has been adapted to be known as 'Yes School, Yes Pool'. The rhetoric of the title then changes such that pool access becomes a reward for attendance, rather than denial of pool access being a punishment for non-attendance. Communities with concerns in this regard are then still able to utilise the potential of pools and swimming to act as a drawcard in motivating students to attend. Other suggested names for the program include 'Go to school to be cool in the pool', 'No School No Pool Uncool' and 'School means pool'.

### *Use of the pool: Flexible learning and student engagement*

While many regard the swimming pool as a resource solely for recreation, it has the potential to provide great educational, social, health and economic benefits to the community.

In the majority of cases, the potential of swimming pools to improve attendance was understood only in terms of the assumption that students' enjoyment of swimming and water activities would entice them to come to school. There was extremely limited recognition of swimming pools as a resource and opportunity for the engagement of students through flexible learning strategies.

A number of interviewees critical of 'No School No Pool' looked to structural changes in the classroom and curriculum as the best means to attract students to attend. There was a strong belief that students would attend only if interested in the material covered in class. Gaps appeared, however, in linking this notion to the commonly accepted assumption that children enjoy, and are interested in, the pool.

As discussed earlier in this paper, flexible learning practices such as incorporating sport and recreation into regular educational practice can be effective in engaging students and encouraging active participation in their schooling. Word or number games that involve interaction with the water, for example, are more likely to peak and maintain student interest than the same activities in the classroom.

It has also been found elsewhere that successful health promotion initiatives that target Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are flexible and community developed<sup>28</sup>. Thus, bringing the classroom to the poolside presents a tremendous opportunity for communities to be involved in the development of learning activities which encourage attendance and student engagement.

## **Conclusion**

'No School No Pool' is a program much more complex than its short, catchy title would indicate. As an attendance strategy it has been received with varied success by remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. There are certain factors that have been identified in this study to be essential to the successful operation of the program. These include:

- Whole of community support (parents, teachers, schools, pool operators, community leadership)
- Open and operational swimming pool facilities
- Consistent operation and enforcement of the program throughout the school year
- Appropriately trained local staff to implement and manage the program throughout the school year
- Incorporation of 'No School No Pool' into broader strategies that address school attendance

- A considered and cautious approach to ensuring 'No School No Pool' is implemented ethically and treats all students fairly
- A flexible and reflexive approach to ensure the program is applied in a way that addresses the specific needs of individual communities.

As such, 'No School No Pool' has the potential to be greatly beneficial to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where both water safety and school attendance rates are of concern. Where possible, all remote communities should consider their options for introducing this or similar programs as a means to effectively utilise existing infrastructure to address community priorities.

While not flawless, 'No School No Pool' demonstrates how a flexible approach to educational practice can engage students and be mutually beneficial for the health and safety of the wider community.

## Conclusion

Water safety is an important issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who die from drowning at a rate four times higher than that of the general Australian population. This group has been identified as one in need of improved access to facilities and water safety programs to address the disproportionately high rate of drowning. This paper examined the issues in terms of providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote communities with improved access to pools.

Access to swimming pools is fundamental to the development of foundation aquatic skills. Aquatics is a life-skill, thus skills development is most effective when learned from a young age. More needs to be known about the circumstances in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people drown so that targeted drowning prevention strategies may be developed. Existing water safety programs should also be adapted to apply specifically to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote communities.

Water safety programs should be developed and delivered in partnership with community bodies and water safety organisations, ensuring they take into account the cultural and linguistic diversity of all community members. Successful water safety programs must have whole of community support to ensure that swimming pools are open and operational for as much of the year as possible. Access to swimming pool facilities and water safety programs has a range of potential health, social and economic benefits; it improves foundation aquatic skills; it improves fitness and child skin, ear and eye health; it provides a social nucleus for the recreation and interaction of community members of all ages; and it provides a range of employment and skills development opportunities for local community members.

Resources must be committed to pool facilities so that skills in aquatics as well as pool management, maintenance and supervision are developed at the local level. This ensures that communities have the capacity for the sustainable management of water safety programs. Swimming pool and water safety programs that operate through the school system (with community support) are vital for developing foundation aquatic skills and can also be used to enhance students' learning through the innovative use of the pool.

The 'No School No Pool' case study reinforces the importance of ensuring that remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and water safety organisations work together. It demonstrates that, although complex, appropriately developed health promotion strategies targeted at remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can produce results enormously beneficial for a wealth of community-identified priorities. When applied cautiously to ensure the fair treatment of all students, 'No School No Pool' has the potential to encourage student attendance, to engage students in learning, to improve child health and fitness, and to aid in the development of foundation aquatic skills.

The case study illustrates that when community bodies (such as schools, healthcare services and governments) recognise the importance of aquatic activity and water safety, and work cooperatively with water safety organisations to develop initiatives at the local level, there are benefits not solely for water safety outcomes, but for the health, economic and social prosperity of the community as a whole.

To maximise the potential benefits of community pools, **remote communities must move beyond the basic assumption that swimming pools are a facility for child swimming alone, so that they may be most effectively utilised as a community resource and asset.**

Remote communities and program developers must therefore first recognise that locally developed programs can work on a multitude of levels; that improved water safety, including reduced drowning rates, is only one potential positive outcome of a water safety program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A flexible approach is necessary so that from the earliest stage of development, program goals seek to maximise each potential benefit for the community.

These benefits are experienced by the community beyond the boundaries of the pool premises themselves and relate to the broader health, economic and social prosperity of communities as a whole. Subsequently, program planning and development must also take place outside these boundaries. The swimming pool is a community asset; therefore, the development of programs and policies that relate to the pool is a community-wide responsibility. Schools, healthcare services and government bodies should all be involved in ensuring that swimming pool facilities are utilised to their greatest capacity.

Water safety is a long term concern for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the need for the delivery of targeted programs is immediate. Possibilities should be investigated for the development of a nationwide paradigm for effective and beneficial pool use in remote communities.

The health, economic and social benefits of swimming pools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote areas are known. These benefits will best be maximised if communities and water safety organisations:

- Work cooperatively to develop and implement programs which address the comparably high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drowning rate;
- Take measures to ensure equality of access for all community members to swimming pool facilities and effective water safety programs that utilise swimming pool infrastructure to its greatest capacity;
- Strive from the outset to develop programs which engage the community by targeting a broad range of community-driven priorities.

These are the issues for consideration by remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities seeking to take the greatest advantage of swimming pool facilities as a community resource and asset. While the fulfilment of individual recommendations made below is a significant achievement, all are interrelated and the best outcomes will be produced for communities if concerted efforts are made by communities and water safety organisations to address recommendations collectively.

## Recommendations

### Program development and delivery

- All remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have access to swimming pool facilities, either in their community, a neighbouring community or in a regional centre.
- Possibilities are explored for the development of a nationwide program which supports the use of remote pools for the health, economic and social benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- New and effective water safety programs are developed to target the specific needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Existing water safety programs are adapted to become more effective in targeting the specific needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

- Targeted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander water safety programs are incorporated into health promotion and education strategies that address broader community-identified priorities.
- A national registry of pools in remote communities is developed, including number of pools, current uses, opening hours/periods and skills of staff.

#### **Community and/or government support**

- Water safety organisations work in partnership with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to develop relevant and culturally appropriate programs. Whole of community support is essential to the success of these programs.
- Governments and communities provide ongoing support and resourcing commitments to swimming pool facilities to maximise their accessibility for all members of the community.
- A cross-community network of swimming pools is developed to help the transfer of skills between communities, thus providing mobile populations with opportunities for regular pool access.

#### **Skills development**

- Local community members are provided with opportunities to develop skills in aquatics, pool management and pool maintenance to ensure communities are self-sufficient in operating and maintaining swimming pool facilities and associated programs.

#### **Research**

- Further research should be undertaken into the circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drowning and into possible effective drowning prevention strategies.
- Further research should be undertaken into strategies that incorporate swimming pools into teaching and learning practice, encouraging schools and communities to implement new and flexible educational practice.

## Contributors

This report was developed by Tarina Rubin, Richard Franklin, Justin Scarr and Amy Peden from the Royal Life Saving Society Australia in consultation with members of school staff in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the Northern Territory. The authors would sincerely like to thank them for their contributions, and hope they benefit from the results of this study. The staff of the Royal Life Saving Society Australia are also thanked for their ongoing support.

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## Glossary

<b>ANTAR</b>	Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation
<b>ARIA</b>	Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia
<b>ASGC</b>	Australian Standard Geographical Classification
<b>ATSI</b>	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
<b>AWSC</b>	Australian Water Safety Council
<b>DEST</b>	Department of Education, Sciences and Training
<b>Foundation aquatic skills</b>	Aquatic skills including water safety knowledge, water confidence, survival skills, safe water entry and exit and elementary swimming skills
<b>HPS</b>	Health Promoting Schools
<b>HREOC</b>	Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission
<b>'No School No Pool'</b>	A school attendance strategy which utilises swimming pools as a means to encourage students to attend school
<b>Otorrhoea</b>	A discharge from the external ear <sup>41</sup>
<b>Otitis media</b>	Acute or chronic inflammation of the middle ear; <i>especially</i> : an acute inflammation especially in infants or young children that is caused by a virus or bacterium, usually occurs as a complication of an upper respiratory infection, and is marked by earache, fever, hearing loss, and sometimes rupture of the tympanic membrane <sup>41</sup>
<b>Pyoderma</b>	A bacterial skin inflammation marked by pus-filled lesions <sup>41</sup>
<b>Remote communities</b>	Refers to communities in both Remote and Very Remote Australia, in accordance with the ASGC remoteness classification. Census Collection Districts in remote areas have an average ARIA index value greater than 5.92 and less than or equal to 10.53. Census Collection Districts in Very Remote areas have an average ARIA index value greater than 10.53.
<b>RLSSA</b>	Royal Life Saving Society Australia
<b>SRA</b>	Shared Responsibility Agreement
<b>SLSQ</b>	Surf Lifesaving Queensland
<b>TICHR</b>	Telethon Institute for Child Health Research
<b>Water safety</b>	The process of ensuring people are adequately prepared for their aquatic environments <sup>2</sup>

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