

## Transcript from “Stories of the Invisible Children” 13 February 2019, Parliament House, Canberra.



(L-R) Royal Far West CEO Lindsay Cane, Hon. Ken Wyatt AM, MP, Minister for Indigenous Health, Charles Sturt University Vice-Chancellor Andy Vann

### Speakers:

- **Professor Andy Vann, Charles Sturt University Vice-Chancellor**
- **Tony Zappia, MP, Shadow Assistant Minister for Medicare**
- **Hon Ken Wyatt AM, MP, Minister for Indigenous Health**
- **Lindsay Cane, CEO, Royal Far West**
- **Emcee: Kim Treasure, Managing Editor, Southern New South Wales for Nine ACM**

### Kim Treasure

Good evening everyone. Welcome to this evening. My name's Kim Treasure. I'm the managing editor for Southern New South Wales for Nine ACM. It's my great pleasure and privilege to be here tonight with you all, so thank you.

Before we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we're meeting tonight, and pay respect to the elders of the Ngunnawal Nation both past and present. I extend this respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in attendance tonight.

I want to welcome our dignitaries and special guests. And you'll have to bear with me a little bit here because we've got quite a few, and thank you all for coming. So the Honourable Ken Wyatt, Minister for Indigenous Health, Minister for Senior Australians and Aged Care, Tony Zappia, Shadow Assistant Minister for Medicare, and Andrew Gee, I think is with us this evening, Andrew. Yes?

## **Andrew Gee**

Yes.

## **Kim Treasure**

Assistant Minister to the Deputy Prime Minister, and Joel Fitzgibbon, Shadow Minister for Rural and Regional Australia, and all our other members of Parliament that have kindly joined us. We also have Andrew Vann, the Vice Chancellor, CSU, members of the CSU Council and other senior staff, Lindsay Cane, CEO, Royal Far West, Board members and staff, representatives from the National Farmers Federation, Rural Doctors Association of Australia, the Cattle Council, Grains Research and Development Council, and many other strong advocates for rural and remote Australia.

That done, we'll get the rest of the night underway. Royal Far West is one of Australia's oldest and most respected charities dedicated to rural and remote children. In early 2017, in response to concerns about the growing vulnerability of country children, Royal Far West commissioned a review of the state of children's developmental health in rural and remote Australia from the Murdoch Children's Research Institute.

This formed the basis of their ground-breaking report, *The Invisible Children*. Armed with a wealth of data, Royal Far West decided it wasn't enough to design services based solely on the figures, but that they needed to understand exactly what parents, teachers, community members, local health services and children really needed.

Royal Far West then teamed up with Charles Sturt University and Nine ACM to host a series of town meetings in regional communities. I was lucky enough to be part of one in Parkes and the stories that we heard that night, I think, really resonated. And I'm sure that has happened in a number of regional centres around New South Wales.

So, coupled with that new data and additional research from the University of Sydney, the report we're launching tonight tells the *Stories of The Invisible Children*. I'd like to welcome Andrew Vann, CSU's Vice Chancellor to start tonight's proceedings.

## **Andrew Vann**

That's good. Thank you and good evening everybody. I'd also like to start by acknowledging the Ngunnawal as traditional owners and to pay my respects to Aboriginal people here. I'd also like to acknowledge all the distinguished guests, and I won't go through them all because it is a long list, and otherwise, we'll probably do nothing else, but I do want to say thank you to everybody for coming tonight, to come to this really important event. It's wonderful to have your support and interest in this. I think it is an important moment for thinking about the future health of regional Australians.

I think without our support and your support and continued attention, vulnerable children will continue to be invisible for generations to come, a scenario I'd suggest that we, as people of influence, cannot allow or tolerate. So the reason we are here tonight is to launch *Stories of The Invisible Children*, which, as Kim mentioned, is a report commissioned by Royal Far West in 2017. It's a confronting and emotionally-affecting report, I think, and it highlights the growing divide in developmental health outcomes and access to services between city and country children.

Unfortunately, I think too many stories of regional Australia are about crises. Much of the imagery we tend to see in the mainstream media in our regions is as a result of a crisis. And having lived in regional Australia for 23 years, I can tell you that sometimes it seems that metropolitan Australia is only interested in the regions when there's a crisis. But if we're going to thrive as a nation into the future, we need to overcome this gulf between capital cities and country, and we need to pay attention and we need to act before crises occur.

The partnership between Charles Sturt University and Royal Far West is directly aimed at intervening before a crisis emerges, and we're working towards real outcomes for the health of our next generation of regional Australians.

The development of this report wasn't done from an office in Canberra or Sydney. It was a partnership between Royal Far West, Charles Sturt University and Nine Australian Community Media. As Kim mentioned, together we travelled across regional New South Wales meeting with hundreds of parents, teachers, health workers and community leaders, and thousands more through social media, to discover the daily challenges faced by country Australians as they seek to find the best support for their children.

Dr. Tamara Cumming, where's Tamara? She's there, thank you, a Charles Sturt academic, whom we're very proud of, interviewed families to discover what is working and where the gaps are. Tamara uncovered new data and insights on the size of the problem as well as including insights from Professor Alex Martiniuk from the University of Sydney via a National Health and Medical Research Council Fellowship, which included in-depth interviews with more than 50 rural and remote parents and carers, principals and educators and Allied Health Service Providers and GPs.

I think the findings are astounding. Children in remote Australia are five times more likely to suffer developmental problems than city kids. One in three country children are unable to access the health services they need. And poor access to doctors and health services for young children living in regional cities and communities means that they are more likely to end up homeless, unemployed, incarcerated and with personal relationship difficulties.

Forty-two per cent of Indigenous Australian children have some developmental challenges, nearly double that of their non-Indigenous peers. The ratio of developmentally vulnerable children to psychologists is over 12 times higher in remote Australia than it is in major cities. Early childhood is the period of greatest development plus developmental plasticity and not addressing concerns can have profound, long-term influences.

As I said, these are astounding findings, but we are working towards solutions to reduce these statistics. Our research tells us that early identification and intervention will help prevent and

mitigate early childhood and developmental health disorders and address parenting issues, presenting issues from the onset.

The highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible, from birth through to the age of five, in disadvantaged families. The available data about the scope of this issue is limited, and more evidence is required to build sound, sustainable national solutions for country children. But this is our aim.

The *Stories of Invisible Children* today are the future adults and regional workforce for the future. For the future educational productivity of our regions and our nation, their development today is essential. The food you've eaten today, the wine you're drinking tonight and some of the day-to-day technology you use has been grown or developed in our regions. The future is important and the connection between children's development and the future is too important to ignore. Unaddressed, the economic cost of these childhood developmental vulnerabilities is likely to curb Australian GDP growth by 10% over the next 60 years. So what can you do?

Before you go to bed tonight and when you wake up in the morning, it's really important that you think about your role as an advocate for the statistics in this report. We all have an opportunity to improve the regions for the next generation and for the generations beyond. So please share the report, share the data, share the findings, and talk about this issue in your communities. Encourage your networks to support the work of Royal Far West and Charles Sturt University, because if we all work together, we can avoid future crises and we can change these children's futures for the better. Thank you.

## **Kim Treasure**

Thank you, Andrew. Next, I'd like to welcome Tony Zappia, our Shadow Assistant Minister for Medicare. Tony is the member for Makin in South Australia and Shadow Assistant for Medicare. He has portfolio responsibility for rural and remote health. Since holding this portfolio, Tony has championed bipartisan support for a national rural health strategy to improve outcomes for Australians living outside the big cities. Tony is also representing Shadow Health Minister, Catherine King, who sends her apologies this evening.

## **Tony Zappia**

Thank you very much, and certainly, thank you for the invitation to speak briefly to you. I also begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land and Ngambri people, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present and future. Can I say, having listened to Vice Chancellor Andy Vann from Charles Sturt University, Andy, I'm not sure that you've left much else for me to say, but it's good to have you here and, again, I won't go through all the acknowledgements either. But I do want to acknowledge Ken Wyatt, who's going to be speaking to you in just a moment, my Parliamentary colleagues that are here, and Lindsay Cane from Royal Far West.

May I say from the outset, to all of you who, in some way, have been involved in this project and in this research, I commend you for doing so. I think this is some terrific work that needed to be done that I've not seen before. And to each and every one of you who, in one way or another,

were involved in it, I think it's a credit to you, and I hope that your work doesn't go unnoticed, and it's up to us, the politicians, and others in this room to make sure that that is the case.

The report, *Stories of Invisible Children*, and the work that has gone into it, I believe, confirms and reaffirms much of the work that has been done in the past by so many other organisations. And indeed, I say this from two perspectives. The first, that I'm also a member of the Standing Committee on Health and Ageing in this Parliament, and we have conducted several inquiries over the years that I've been on that committee that have drawn me to come to similar conclusions as what I read in this report.

And indeed, in some of the more recent inquiries that we've been involved in, one of them being about hearing health across Australia, the issue of how hearing health or the lack of services in respect to it, and how that particularly affects the young people in this country was one of the critical issues that we were trying to deal with. And so, again, I see this report as confirming some of that work. But then it was no different when we recently went to other parts of Australia and had the Ageing Inquiry where, again, the same themes were coming through over and over, and not so differently with the Sleeping Inquiry that we just concluded whereby services to people in country Australia are far, far different and much more difficult to access than they are in city Australia.

That, in turn, creates a huge health service divide between country and city folks, a divide that is reflected both in terms of the outcome for people that live in the two separate areas, but also a divide that you can actually quantify in terms of the dollars that are being spent and the returns on the dollars that you would otherwise get if the services were being provided.

This report is important because it not only reinforces that city/country divide, but it also goes further in terms of what that then means to the children of this country. For them, it is not just an immediate service, and it is not just an immediate benefit. It's a lifelong benefit that affects them.

And again, I just want to stress this point because it was one of the things that we focused on in the hearing inquiry that I referred to. A child that has a hearing impairment of one sort or another has their whole future education possibly affected, and that means their career and they lost all that follows. And so the impacts on that child, on the family and on society more broadly then become magnified many times over. And therefore, it's for those reasons that this is so important. But it also, in terms of this report, it quantifies, it actually quantifies the level of disadvantage for children.

I'm not sure I've seen anything in the past that actually does that. And being able to quantify the level of disadvantage, again, is important because as I said in another forum this morning, if you want politicians to respond to a report, then you need to have the evidence. If you have the evidence, it makes a world of difference to how it is treated. Because most of the policies we try to adopt in this place are generally evidence-based.

Lastly, the report goes also another step further which, quite often, is something that is lacking in other reports that I read. And that is that it actually includes some recommendations as to what

we can and should be doing. So it gives us a way forward. And I think the nine recommendations that are in this report are worthy of consideration, and recommendations that I think have been carefully thought through, and I commend all those involved for doing that.

I'm not going to go through all the different findings because Andy did that to some extent. But I just want to touch on a couple of them, that remote children are five times more likely to suffer developmental problems, five times more likely. I mean perhaps there's a parent of kids in metro area. That never dawned on me. But if I was a parent, that would be a real concern to me. One in three children unable to access health services they need, and in particular, 42% of Indigenous Australian children have developmental challenges nearly twice that of others.

In fact, I was, again, just talking a few moments ago about the 100,000 kids in this country who don't have access to developmental services. What does it mean for their future? And realistically, we in this room, as adults and leaders in our own way, are responsible for that. And what can we do to change that? And we need to, because I don't think there's any doubt that across this country and across this Parliament, there would be the goodwill from all of us on all sides of politics to do something for children if we know that there's a problem and we also know that there's a way forward.

Over seven million Australians live in what we call country Australia. So that means that for those children that are affected, it also goes to the mum and dad, sisters and the like. It's an issue that we cannot continue to ignore. It's an issue that creates a real social divide between country and city folks, and it's an issue that, as I've said a moment ago, has been identified time and time again.

Indeed, I've made many speeches about it, as I'm sure Ken has in his own portfolio areas. It's an issue that we cannot continue to ignore, and it's an issue that I believe, that is now starting to develop sufficient goodwill across the Parliament and across all members of the Parliament for us to try and do something about it. Again, as I said this morning in another forum, the solutions are not always easy, and they are quite often complex. But the bottom line to any solution is that it requires the political will to do something. Without that political will, then nothing will happen. The political will comes about when, (a), you've got the evidence, as you have, and you've got the drivers as, again, you have with this report in terms of what is the problem, what does it create for society if we don't do something about it, and what are the solutions?

The report in itself, in my view, shines a real light on a national problem that needs to be addressed, and I hope that governments, whether it's federal, state, even local, take note of this report. And I hope that it is the precursor to getting the action that we require to do something about the invisible children, that their stories are introduced in this report. Thank you.

## **Kim Treasure**

Thank you, Tony. And certainly, from the media perspective, we'll be watching with interest and really keen to see some action happen. So it's a story we'll delight in following.

Next, I'd like to welcome Ken Wyatt, the Minister for Indigenous Health. Ken was elected in 2010 as the Federal Member for Hasluck in Western Australia, making history as the first Indigenous member of the House of Representatives. Before entering politics, Ken worked in community roles in the fields of health and education. He's also made an enormous contribution to the wider community in training and mentoring young people. This was recognised in 1996 when Ken was awarded the Order of Australia in the Queen's Birthday Honours List. In 2000, he was awarded a Centenary of Federation Medal for his efforts and contribution to improving the quality of life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and mainstream Australian society in education and health. Please welcome Ken.

## **Ken Wyatt**

I want to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we're meeting, the Ngannawal and Ngambri people, the elders past and present and those who will come in the future.

Any Vann, I want to thank you as Vice Chancellor for the commitment of your University to what has been an enjoyable task in raising some issues, which I'll go to. Tony Zappia. Tony is a colleague whose contribution in this House has been focused around the needs of people, people he represents, and Australians across the board. And Lindsay Cane, there's a lot I could say about you from both the dinners we've had, the first time we met, your vision and your thinking, and your preparedness to be daring. And I think that's important in this.

The issue we face are the degrees of invisibility, because they will vary by community. They will vary by family. They vary by geographic diversity. When I had a look at this report, I thought, "This is interesting," because I could relate this to my own journey. Born in a mission, grew up in a place called Nannine, which is east of ... oh, sorry, west of Meekatharra, no engagement with other children for probably four years other than a brother and sister. And so by the time I went to my first year in school ... not my first year, my first three months in Meekatharra District High School, I hated conversations with other people for a couple of reasons.

One is when you are socially isolated or you live within very small communities, your circle of influence are those in your immediacy. And you don't harness the skills to go beyond the immediacy of that circle. When I went to Meekatharra District High School for the three months, I hated every moment of it because it was outside the paradigm of my invisibility of not being part of a broader array of people that influenced an impact on you.

We would find this in every element of the children whose stories you've examined, because their journey would be similar. When I went to school, my teacher, Miss Abernathy, recognised that I had not had the exposure to language acquisition in the way that you would expect of a child in a normal district high school. So she used to invite me every morning. School was officially opened at 8:30 but I'd go there at 8:00. And each day, she'd have a word on the board and she would teach me that word, put it in a sentence and get me to talk about the word. It took her a while, and she said it was like extracting teeth from a chook, and she said it was challenging.

And that's the invisibility element, because you don't have access. I didn't have my first set of injections until I was about five. Because the needle hurt, I'd kick the nurse and got a belting for it. But it was the fact that the interaction and exposure was challenging. For the first 12 months, she brought me up to speed. I would not publicly speak until I was 17. Because again, I was used to my own company, my own small set of friends. And when I travelled this nation and I talked to Australians in every corner of our continent, I find children in the same situation. I sit and talk with people, go into a pub and sit next to the man who has a permanent chair in a pub and have a conversation, talk about what they don't get, what they don't have.

Tony and I, this morning, talked about the gap for those who live in regions of this country that don't have what we take for granted in any capital city or a large centre. And often, we don't examine the invisible nature that confronts and faces children. And you can see it reflected in adults who've never left a small country town, whose whole life ... and I look at the river towns of New South Wales, there are people I know there who will have a conversation with those within their immediacy of the company and companionship that they have developed over a period of time. Try and talk to them about broader issues. It is challenging. Talk to them about, "Have you been to The Big Smoke?" and there are people who will say, "No," and they rely on whatever meagre services are brought to them.

What I like about this report, Lindsay, is that you're highlighting children who are vulnerable. If I had not had the journey because of Miss Abernathy, I would not be standing here today. I would probably still be in either Meekatharra or Nannine. And as I meet people who are homeless in homeless aged care facilities, everyone I've had a conversation with are those who had invisible lives in a country town.

They worked on a farm all their life until they became unemployable because of their physical and emotional or mental health challenge, because there was no other opportunity for them to go and train or skill anywhere. And all of them said to me, "Education was not a driver. It served its purpose, but I always had a job on the pastoral station. I always had a job as the chef's cook ... a chef's assistant."

And every story I heard at Wintergarden in Melbourne was the same. Everybody there were one of those invisible kids of the bush, they only came to a capital city because there was nothing left for them in the town that they had grown up in, or their town had died. This piece of work goes to the very hub of the essence of a child's capacity to reach their individual fulfillment as a human being, but more so as a partner, a companion, a friend and a contributor to an economy.

I just think of some of the wasted lives because the opportunity was never offered to them. I think of Indigenous kids who stay within their communities because their capacity has never been challenged nor pushed. And when Lindsay sat and spoke with me about her vision and her idea, I loved it because what she was going to do was turn the spotlight on a portion of our population who need to have the spotlight turned on them.

Because if we don't turn a spotlight on an issue in our nation, then we never address it. It becomes invisible from a broader perspective. So the invisibility, as I said, are in degrees and it will vary

across the nation depending on who you are. If you're at Balgo on the top end of WA and on the border, it would be more noticeable if it hadn't been for La Salle College in WA taking all the Aboriginal kids who had reached high school age and brought them down to Perth and boarded them together. Balgo had their first high school graduate three years ago. And what that young fellow said when he spoke to me is he said, "I can now go back and encourage others to learn what I've learnt and walk a pathway into hope." This is what Far West will achieve. By focusing on these issues, you make people like Tony and I aware of what we need to do.

The issue is we have to make every other colleague in this place aware as well, because unless the policy and lawmakers of this nation take into consideration the issues that you have identified as very critical issues in this report, and I love these, both, when I had a quick scan through, then we will not address them. Because our eyes will not be gazing upon the invisible.

We will gaze on those who gain our attention through either lobbying or through proximity of the work that we do across this nation. I want to congratulate the Board members as well. And Joan, it was great finally meeting you. And I thank you for your dedication to our invisible children. I think the other thing that we won't anticipate as an unintended consequence is when we turn these invisible children into visible individuals.

Then we influence their mothers and fathers, and that influence is far more powerful when somebody realises that their child has a journey that can take them to a different pathway other than the town in which they grew up in. I think of every kid who has their first escalator ride. First time I stood on one of those, I was scared. The first time I jumped into the ocean at City beach, I thought it was fresh water until I got a mouthful. And I said to my uncle at the time, "Who put the salt in the water?" and he just laughed, because that's the reality of life for the invisible kids. So I congratulate you on your reports, and I congratulate your University for taking a genuine interest in identifying what it is that we, as a nation, have to look at, that we, as adults in this room and those of us in every tier of government, need to turn our minds to.

So the journey is a good one, and in the future, you better look back and say, "Lindsay and the Board members, and for the University," to say, "We had an influence on these kids. We gave them a journey into a life that they didn't dream of but were capable of achieving." Congratulations to all of you.

## **Kim Treasure**

Thank you, Ken, and thanks for sharing those really personal stories. I think it really brought it home to all of us here. Finally, I'd like to invite Lindsay Cane, the CEO of Royal Far West to the microphone. Lindsay has been CEO for the last eight years, overseeing significant reforms to significantly increase the number of children that Royal Far West is able to support each year.

There were around 700 children, I believe, and now up to more than 8,000 beneficiaries in the last financial year, a massive increase. Significantly, under Lindsay's leadership, Royal Far West opened their state-of-the-art \$40 million Centre for Country Kids in December and was an early adopter of

technology, operating the ground-breaking Telecare for Kids program for more than five years now. Thanks Lindsay.

## **Lindsay Cane**

Thanks everyone. Please, anyone who's standing who wants to sit down, please, it won't be rude. So if you do decide that you want to squat, please do so. Kim, thank you so much for the invitation. I think I heard to come and terrorise the halls of this place every day. So Joan, I need to talk about rental down here because I can't think of anything better than helping you achieve that task.

To formally acknowledge the traditional owners and to say how proud I am to acknowledge that we're so lucky in this country to walk on Aboriginal land, and to share the two cultures that we have, which not everyone has that chance, so we're very proud to be here.

I've got some lovely friends. All of you in the room are friends who wouldn't have been here otherwise. Kim, thank you for helping us on this. Andy, the partnership with you is fantastic. All of our Parliamentary friends, Ken and Tony, it's been lovely getting a chance to talk to you this morning and this afternoon. And of course, Mark [Coulton], you've had to listen a lot to us, haven't you?

## **Mark Coulton**

I had no choice!

## **Lindsay Cane**

Andrew? Where's ... Andrew's heard a bit. It's very easy to say what we have to say. We're irrepressible at Royal Far West. We're like march ants that will not stop. And clarity is power, people say. If you're clear, you're powerful. We have one mission, country kids deserve to be as well as any city child. So we don't stop until we get there, and maybe we'll never quite get there. Maybe we will get there. But we'll certainly turn the invisible to the visible. That is achievable. The evidence gives us the clarity, again, to build on that. And I'm so appreciative of everyone who gives their time and their energy to all of us to do this job.

We often talk about friends at Royal Far West. We talk about friend-raising rather than fundraising. We're a charity but we talk about friend-raising and some of you have heard me say this before, that friends are the way to getting things done. Our business works on a gifting cycle.

People give to us. We give to our clients. Hopefully, one day, they'll have a chance to give to someone else. As long as that gifting cycle keeps working, you can do amazing things. We've got good friends in the room. Friends talk to each other, they have coffee together, they sit down together and have ideas. And then you can ring someone up and say, "Hey. I've got an idea for you. I want you to meet someone."

And that's how our life is at Royal Far West. What we're so proud to do is it's on behalf of children and families who live in rural and regional Australia. That's easy then because you just get up in the morning and you just keep doing it. In this room, a lot of my wonderful staff and in front of all of the rest of you friends, I would like to say to my chair and my staff, we have an irrepressible team here who also drink from the Kool-Aid, and that's a wonderful thing to do.

And we're in our brand new and beautiful building. Thank you for mentioning that, which this Government has absolutely helped us get there. When we opened it, the Deputy Prime Minister spoke to us. He could feel and we could feel just how committed and how important that commitment was to getting an achievement.

So we now have Australia's only Centre for Country Kids in Manly with these beautiful telepods and other facilities, \$1.5 million worth of donations from Cisco and HP to give us the technology that's so advanced to now be able to take what we do face-to-face, use technology, and go to the furthest and most remote parts of Australia and beyond in time to serve kids in need. It's a wonderful thing to be able to do. It's a wonderful thing that we can do because people are giving to us, and we keep giving. So that's us pretty much. The kids and giving a voice: these reports are pretty great. Thank you for your generous words, everyone. But we started with this one, The Invisible Children. We said there's a problem.

We actually knew the size of the problem ourselves but "Royal Far West charity who? Royal Flying Doctors, no, other royal folks, no". And so we said, "No, let's not do that. Let's ask the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, well-known friend of many, to do it independently." They did a wonderful report and they came up with the fact that there's a massive problem. There are these invisible children.

We then said, "But the data and the evidence that's two-dimensional is here, but it's head and heart, isn't it?" The things that get us, that compel us, it's head and heart. It's the evidence, and you spoke about it today, Tony, about it is the evidence, but it is the social and it's the justice stuff and the human issues that matter as well, and the layer on top of it. We went for the heart, and we said, "Just tell us what the evidence says when you talk to the people." And when we give a voice to the people, what do they say? It's incredibly humbling, and the University would share that. Every time we went out and talked to more people, it became more and more humbling, which then empowers you to want to do more and more and find more and more energy to do it because these people don't have a voice yet.

And I'm really encouraged tonight to know they will have a voice because the rest of us will give it to them. Then we didn't stop there either because the power of our great friends, CSU, who's totally, totally committed as an institution to the same communities that we are, and dedicated to growing the capacity of our rural communities.

We then took the heart with the head and turned it into an academic document that's very readable, I might say, that has head and heart in it as well that will go in different distribution channels, I imagine. But together, we've got a very sweet suite of readings here that are very

compelling. That's a humble charity doing this, and I'm very proud to say charities working with government can do amazing things.

And that's what this is, an NGO alliance with the government, with a University doing pretty good things, and it's pretty good fun. Thank you for allowing me to share that with you because it is a good way to operate. Andy has shared with us the stats, and so too has Tony and Ken, so I don't need to do that again.

But some of the stories that came through from the people, just to illustrate a couple of them, one Mum says, "Where we lived previously because we had to move from town, my child would have to go 360 kilometres one way to see the Paediatric Allied Health specialist. And then we'd go in another direction, 100ks, to see the Orthodontist because that was related to the condition, and then we'd go a further 200 kilometres in one direction to see the Paediatrician because my child has a complex issue. A 700-kilometre round trip once or twice a week, which was physically impossible". That was one of the issues: the petrol that had to go in the car, the time off work, Dad's shearing, they've got three kids, this is one child, the separation, the anxiety, the mental health that you referred to, Tony, the mental health of the families and the grandmas that have to extend themselves for a second time around to look after children.

It just goes on and on. This mother, her daughter has ADHD. "I put her in the car. I strap her in the car. I needed to get her to the nearest town with therapy available. It's a two-hour trip. It puts her in a foul mood. So when I get there to do this therapy that's costing me \$175, she's not going to participate. Or she might participate in some, and then she turns off. And then I have to strap her back in the car and drive home. The whole process of going is just so daunting for me. It costs a lot. Is it really worth it?"

Mothers despairing, mothers that know that something's wrong with their child and occasionally, what they've got in town might be a GP, a very busy GP. "He'll grow out of it. She'll grow out of it." No, mums know that's not ... Not with a developmental health issue. You can be guided out of it, but they're not just going to "grow up" out of it. A conduct disorder, the single biggest indicator of a child who will develop a mental health problem later in life is a conduct disorder. And that's probably one of the most frequent things that we see.

Bingo! A red flag goes up, you see a conduct disorder, we know we can prevent mental health later in life. That's a really big priority for this Government. If we invest even earlier, we don't need the head spaces of the future, potentially. So we have to turn this dial back, back to 0 to 12, 0 to 6-year-olds, not just the first 2,000 days of life. That's when they become invisible, after that period when they've been tested by the system for profound hearing loss at birth. But six months after birth, a year into their life, they weren't breastfed, they're living in a very non-hygienic home, they develop conductive hearing loss. They then are deaf, then speech goes, then their learning goes, and their esteem goes, then they're not learning in the classroom.

Then they're labelled a bad kid, then they're expelled from kindergarten or from the playground, and so the cycle goes until they either end up in the juvenile justice system, the mental health system or somewhere else equally disastrous. We know that. That evidence is already out there,

but that's what this is now saying and I think it's going to help a few more people understand we could do something about this.

Kids who can't speak, read, write, catch a ball, be socially appropriate, hold a pen and tell a simple story, we're not talking about turning kids into rocket scientists. We're just saying very simple things that allow kids to be what they want. They want to be able to make friends and be normal. And in rural and regional and remote Australia, there's a lot of kids who don't feel like that, kids who are expelled from kindergarten.

They're over-sexualised in the playground. They suffer from early life trauma and mental health disorders. And a child with a mental health problem at age three ... We're all familiar with recognising adults with mental health disorders. We know what that looks like. Just think about the child of three. We see so many children referred to us now, at three years of age, with acute anxiety.

You go, "What's going on in that little life? Don't you? At age three." And what it looks like is very unattractive and very sad. So that's reality though and that's what these mums, teachers ... In this report, you'll read teachers and carers and grandmas and all sorts of people saying, "It's a bit tough."

But the humbling thing about that is country people are proud and they're humble, and they just get on and do it anyway. So this is a beautiful thing for Australia to pick it up. In my view, reducing the childhood vulnerability in Australia should become a regional development priority. It could sit alongside reducing taxes, improving roads, investing in human capital, reduce the childhood vulnerability rate in Australia from 22% to 10%, and there'll be a massive impact on the GDP growth over the next few years.

There's also an economic argument, which I asked you about today, Tony, and you very nicely answered. Thank you very much. Seven years ago, Andy and I began a journey together. You took over CSU and I joined Royal Far West. And we both said, "We will come to Canberra together and we will sit together and we will talk to the Government about a partnership, about a University, an NGO with a very clear focus," but we need it endorsed and we need it backed by the Government. And today, we had a wonderful meeting to share that, and we feel that happened a bit earlier. But that's about the journey, and I want to congratulate you, Andy, and all your team for being there with us the whole way. CSU have absolutely had skin in the game here, and it doesn't stop here.

There's one other thing we want to share with you tonight, which is playing a short video, which was actually created for us by the Australian Digital Health Agency because they learnt about our Telehealth program, and they wanted to use it as an exemplar to demonstrate the power of technology in Australia. In fact, what they did for us was a lovely thing in making a video that tells a story pretty well-straight-up. Here's the video.

**(Video is played)**

## **Lindsay Cane**

Tonight would not have been possible in such a busy week without our Parliamentary friends of Rural Health. And Warren one and Warren two, as we called them this morning, Warren Entsch and Warren Snowdon, particularly have been very, very helpful in helping to make tonight happen, and all of the Parliamentary friends, we've met with you before and really appreciated that. So going back to that friends thing, thanks for looking after us.

We'll look after what we have to do. We'll look after you guys as well to make sure that you know what you can do and we'll help you. I hope to see all of you somehow in our life around celebrating this report. I think do I have to now say that it's officially launched? Mike Foley, where are you, and Nine ACM?

Thank you so much for everything you do for us. This report is now officially in the market, and please, give it to your friends for New Year, Valentine's Day, anything, anything you'd like to do, suggest that it's a beaut read and it'll put a ... Maybe it'll put you to sleep, but anyway. Maybe I'll stop there. Thanks very much for coming everyone. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

End