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Kids miss out on early intervention

Hayley Sorensen

TROUBLED children in Central Australia have to wait two years to see child development experts in Alice Springs.

A submission by the Alice Springs Hospital paediatrics department to the royal commission into youth justice in the Northern Territory, released publicly on Monday, says children are missing out on early intervention because of a lack of allied health staff.

According to the submission, made late last year, half of all outpatient paediatric referrals made at Royal Darwin Hospital were for behavioural or developmental problems.

In Alice Springs, that figure is 40 per cent and is as high as 75 per cent at one Aboriginal medical services provider.

Some babies with “severe developmental delay” in remote parts of Central Australia did not see any allied health professionals in their first 18 months of life, meaning they missed out on the window where “intervention is most effective”.

“We know the need for an equitable allied health service.”

“Older children with behavioural problems that have not received psychology and other mental health services are at greater risk of developing more challenging anti-social behaviours, encounters with the juvenile justice service and subsequent detention,” the submission read.

An “urgent human resource strategy” to address staff numbers and professional development was needed to fix the situation.

“Without the development of an equitable allied health service, a medical check-up by a paediatrician is almost worthless. We know the need and we need action from the NT Government to address the problem,” it said.

Another submission, from Menzies School of Health Research, says most young offenders “grow out of” their poor behaviour as they develop.

“Much research has shown the juvenile institutions are not rehabilitative or cost effective; incarceration is traumatic and interferes with the development process of young people,” it read.

“Incarceration can lead to an increase rather than a decrease in antagonism to authority; incarceration exposes younger offenders to the criminal practices of older offenders, so they learn how to be better at committing crimes and not getting caught.”

The royal commission, headed by Margaret White and Mick Gooda, was meant to make its final report to the Federal Government at the end of September, but was last week granted an extension until November 17.

It is the third extension given to the royal commission.

The commission will have to complete the report within its existing \$50 million budget.