

# Speech delivered at STARTTS 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations

**6th December 2013**

**By Jorge Aroche, Chief Executive Officer, STARTTS**

Her Excellency Prof. Marie Bashir, Senator the Honourable Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, Mr Guy Zangari Member for Fairfield, the Hon. Paul Lynch Member for Liverpool, Mr Andrew Rohan Member for Smithfield, the Honourable David Shoebridge MLC, Dr John Feneley, Uncle Des Dyer, Associate Professor Roger Gurr, Ms Amanda Larkin CEO South West Sydney Local Health District, Professor Derrick Silove, Margaret Bennett (my predecessor many years ago), Refugee community leaders, distinguished guests, friends and colleagues.

First of all, thank you for being here, taking the time in your busy schedules to share with us this celebration of 25 years of STARTTS. It is a very emotional and momentous time for us, and the presence here of every single one of you adds meaning and weight to this occasion.

I would like to also thank the previous speakers for their kind comments about the importance and quality of the work of STARTTS. I am very proud of our work, I am very proud of my team, and I think I echo all of my colleagues in the audience if I say that to hear such comments from such eminent people is quite overwhelming to say the least. And then, of course, to hear it from our clients in such a heartfelt way... it is an absolute privilege. Thank you.

Today, we celebrate 25 years of STARTTS the organization, but the real celebration is about the real outcomes of those 25 years of work, outcomes that cannot be adequately measured in number of clients seen, occasions of service, papers written, partnerships developed, or any other service provision statistic by itself. Our job, *our Mission*, goes beyond helping people overcome specific symptoms; it involves empowering them to regain control of their internal resources, to reclaim their lives and their future, to transform horror into hope.

When our job is done, the outcomes that we see go well beyond the wellbeing of the individual we have assisted... they can be seen in the smiles and brighter future of their children, in their economic, social and cultural contribution to the community at large, and in the thousands of intangible ways in which lives well lived strengthen and vitalise the fabric of our society.

This is what makes the work of STARTTS and other organisations supporting refugees at this crucial stage such a good investment in our society.

This is why Torture and Trauma services are an essential service for a country with a refugee program, not just because rehabilitation after torture is the right and humane thing to do, or because Article 14 of the Convention says we should, but because assisting people who have been affected by torture and refugee trauma to regain their capacity to live up to their potential and contribute fully to our society represents one of the cleverest and longer sighted investment we can make in our nation.

Before we congratulate ourselves too much, however, it is important to remember that the need for the existence of organisations such as STARTTS is a sad indictment on the state of the world, and (even while we continue to improve our treatment and rehabilitation techniques) we must never stop dreaming and working towards a world where STARTTS and its sister services are no longer needed. A world where perhaps the valuable lessons we have learnt assisting the victims of organised human on human violence can be put to work to assist survivors of other kinds of trauma.

Not in our lifetimes, unfortunately... The reality is that even if torture and the gross violations of human rights that traumatise our clients and produce refugees by the thousands every month were to stop *right now*, we would still have a lifetime of work for torture and trauma services to do.

As a CEO, my role in the STARTTS team is to look forward and to plan ahead, and to ensure that STARTTS capitalises on the success of the last 25 years to continue to excel in achieving the mission I described earlier. I'd like to use this opportunity, therefore, to share with you some of the major challenges and projects that lay ahead. And please let me emphasise this is only a few of a rather lengthy list.

Some of our ongoing challenges actually stem from our very success in some areas... As has been mentioned earlier, STARTTS has continued to explore new and more effective ways to address the impact of trauma at various levels, sometimes learning and adapting from work in other fields, other times developing new approaches in our own right. This creates at least two challenges, one is to develop the means to evaluate, research and document their effectiveness, and the other to ensure that the valuable lessons learnt in this process make their way beyond STARTTS, and contribute to the work of similar services elsewhere, and even the work in related fields of trauma both in Australia and beyond.

Another ongoing challenge is the impact of policy changes and the unfortunate political and media discourse that often goes with it. It affects people's lives and their process of recovery far more that most people realise, and it works against what Australia does really well; assisting people

damaged by torture and other human rights violations to overcome their problems and become contributing members of our society.

On this note, we are also **very** concerned about the impact of a reintroduction of Temporary Protection for people who have been officially recognised as having legitimate grounds for protection. We know, from our previous experience with this policy several years ago, that it places people in a very vulnerable position that can exacerbate any psychological and psycho-social problems already present, and it impairs their ability to rebuild their lives and contribute to our society. As an agency, and as a clinical service, assisting clients facing these difficulties was challenging in the past, and will again be challenging if the measure is reintroduced.

The last challenge I want to highlight today is one that arises out of the changes in the demographics of our client group. On the one hand, we have a younger client group, and while our services to children and young people have increased, there are still gaps, particularly in school settings which we know could make a big difference to their ability to settle successfully and do well in life. The other is a reflection of the fact that Australia has had a refugee policy since 1977. Therefore many people who arrived here as adults have begun to reach an age where the impact of trauma interacts with age related conditions, often creating complex presentations and much distress. This is a relatively uncharted area that requires more focus and resources.

Luckily, and this room attests to this, we are not alone in facing these challenges. Much of the success of STARTTS is due to the partnerships we have been able to forge with other agencies, government and non government alike, and of course, with refugee communities... Thanks to these partnerships, to the strong bonds with our sister services in other states, to the team work that prevails at STARTTS, and to the creativity and resourcefulness inspired by our clients, the last 25 years have proven that challenges can not only be conquerable, but incredibly rewarding learning experiences. And STARTTS takes great pride in being a learning organisation.

I'd like to thank you all again, on behalf of the STARTTS team for being here, for supporting us here at this event, and over the years. STARTTS has many friends, and many of you have supported our work in many different fashions, from the halls of politics to the wheels of bureaucracy, from the midst of refugee communities to the counselling room. And even by having fun with us at the STARTTS annual Refugee Ball!!! We are indebted to you all.

As CEO, I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the wonderful staff of STARTTS, both past and present. STARTTS has changed and grown much over the years, in both size and scope, but one thing that has not changed is the passion and commitment of our staff. From my deputy Lachlan Murdoch and my senior management team to the most recent

recruit, *you* are STARTTS' biggest asset, and have contributed so much and in so many ways to make STARTTS what it is today. Thank you for your support and for your commitment. I value it more than I can say in words.

Also, from us all as staff members, I would like to thank Associate Professor Roger Gurr and the rest of STARTTS' Board of Directors, for your leadership and support, and for the trust you have bestowed in me and the rest of my management team. Thank you.

I would also like to thank Friends of STARTTS, and the many volunteers that have contributed so much to assist us in our work.

None of this would be possible, of course, without the continued funding and support from successive state and commonwealth governments. The continued bipartisan political support for STARTTS in NSW and for STARTTS and its sister services in Australia is a credit to our political system. I would like to acknowledge and thank, therefore, the NSW Department of Health and the South West Sydney Local Health District for their funding and support in various ways from the inception of STARTTS, the Commonwealth Department of Health for their funding through the Program of Assistance for Survivors of Torture and Trauma, that made a truly national approach possible, and the Department of Immigration for funding under various programs since almost the beginning of STARTTS, as well as the many other funding bodies that have made possible so many great projects.

Finally, I would like to convey a big thank you from all of us to the thousands of clients with whom we had the privilege to work with over the last twenty five years, many of whom we continue to work with as friends, supporters, community leaders and volunteers. You've taught us that regaining health after torture is only the beginning. That the real results of our work can be best seen in your thriving families, in the contribution you make day by day to our society, and in the certainty of a brighter future that can be seen in the faces of your children. To help bring this about has been STARTTS' mission for the last 25 years and will continue to be so with you as our main source of inspiration.

Thank you

Jorge Aroche  
CEO  
STARTTS