

July 26 2012

The Hon Julia Gillard MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister

I write to urge the Australian Government to act immediately to mandate the use of low-aromatic (Opal) fuel in areas where petrol sniffing is still of concern.

The Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia (ADCA) was privileged to attend a series of meetings in Canberra in late June, brokered by the Central Australian Youth Link-Up Scheme (CAYLUS). CAYLUS' Blair McFarland brought three senior Indigenous women with him from Central Australia, who spoke eloquently to MPs and Senators, including Indigenous Health Minister Warren Snowdon, about the problems of petrol sniffing in their communities. The Opposition Leader's office also met the CAYLUS delegation and has indicated support for mandating Opal.

Minister Snowdon who, on a several occasions has publicly stated that the matter is one for the States and Territories, expressed his willingness to address the issue on a number of fronts. These included again raising the matter with the NT Government over its position on legislation to mandate the supply of Opal fuel and writing to Health Ministers in Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland about the states' intentions to mandate supply.

Petrol sniffing, like the substance itself, is highly volatile. The epidemic comes in waves, surfacing briefly in one community then subsiding before reoccurring somewhere else.

Pam Corbett from Lake Nash, who attended the Canberra meetings, expressed concern that it was only a matter of time before more young locals again embarked on sniffing unleaded petrol that locals brought into the community after refuelling at Urandangie over the Queensland border. We hear via media reports that the outbreak, as anticipated, has occurred.

The evidence is there for all to see. BP developed Opal specifically to counter the harm caused in Indigenous communities by sniffing unleaded petrol. The company remains committed to working on education and positive engagement programs with the Department of Health and Ageing to address what it regards as one of the biggest indigenous health issues in Australia.

Thanks to the collaboration between BP and DOHA, the Opal rollout has been a spectacular success with research showing a reduction of 70 per cent in sniffing across all areas where it has been introduced. CAYLUS estimates that this figure is as high as 94 per cent in Central Australia.

Low aromatic fuel is the single most effective counter ever devised in the long fight against the devastating effects of petrol sniffing in remote communities. These communities continue to suffer a great disservice as a result of successive Governments' apparent unwillingness to confront the issue with the most powerful weapon in our armoury.

Your coalition partner has introduced the Low Aromatic Fuel Bill to the Senate, which I urge you to support. Surely it's time to round up the few recalcitrants who refuse to stock Opal fuel – like the proprietor of the Mount Dare hotel in far northern South Australia who has told a nearby Aboriginal community that he doesn't want its business – by mandating its use wherever petrol sniffing is likely to occur. This appalling mentality needs to be treated with the contempt it deserves.

And please, let that happen as quickly as possible.

As mentioned at the start of this letter, ADCA was involved in discussions with Minister Snowdon's office and has copied this letter to him.

Yours sincerely

David Templeman
Chief Executive Officer

cc: Hon Warren Snowdon MP
Minister for Indigenous Health