

To the House of Representatives Standing Committee  
on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.

A submission to the Inquiry into remote community stores.

From Margaret and David Hewitt.

For the past 11 years we have been relieving store and roadhouse managers, community development advisors and essential services officers in remote communities in the Pitjantjatjara, Ngaanyatjarra and Martu Lands in South Australia and Western Australia. Prior to this we had spent 25 years as a nurse and building supervisor in communities in Central Australia and the Kimberley.

We were involved in the establishment of the Docker River community store and the Ininti Store at Uluru in the early 1970s.

Our 36 years in remote communities has seen a marked improvement in the health of mothers, babies and children but a serious decline in the health of adults. Lifestyle illnesses such as kidney failure, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and serious overweight problems have been appearing where these were totally absent in their traditional lives or during their time on missions or working on cattle stations.

Takeover of missions by Government in the 1970s and equal pay in the pastoral industry meant big changes. The establishment of independent community stores and influence from Aboriginal peak organisations saw profit driven policies introduced to stores. In many stores these included for the first time, sales of takeaway and convenience foods, cool drinks, lollies and chocolates, sliced white bread (instead of community baked wholemeal bread), a wide range of consumer goods and poorer quality fruit and vegetables - as local vegetable gardens and orchards disappeared almost overnight. Community health services have been battling against the introduction of these unhealthy store supplies for over 30 years now.

More money in communities, the introduction of TV, the total dependence on motor cars and easy access to attractive, but not necessarily nutritious foods has meant less incentive for hunting and bush food gathering. With poorer health and obesity, there is not the energy or inclination to walk long distances, chase game, climb trees or to dig for witchetty grubs or honey ants. Activities such as art centres where people are sitting down all day also contribute to lack of physical activity. Another serious problem in

recent years has been the demise of quandong trees that provided a popular fruit, very high in vitamin C. Huge numbers of camels roaming the desert are destroying the trees at such a rate that there may not be a quandong left in the wild in 10 years time. - a very sad indictment on one influence of European settlement in remote Australia.

### **Healthy food promotion**

The powerful position that remote store managers hold in the community needs to be acknowledged if a change is to be made in health outcomes. Profit is not the only consideration though the success of a store is often judged by the amount of money that the store can return to the community - either in direct cash handouts or the supply of items such as white goods to community members, or in provision of community facilities. It is often claimed that removing unhealthy food and drinks from shelves and promoting a nutritious diet will send a store broke.

In some Central Australian communities there have been efforts to address the problem of quality food and poor health. In the APY Lands in South Australia, the Mai Wiru policy, introduced in 2002 and at first very slow to be taken on by the community stores, is now making a major contribution to healthy foods. Store managers, although in some APY communities it took considerable persuasion, now have to agree to the promotion of good foods while discouraging other food and drinks. A key component of Mai Wiru has been the monitoring of overall sales. With amendments for local conditions it is a model that can easily be taken up in other remote stores.

We are totally committed to the promotion of nutritious foods but relieving staff have only a limited scope for introducing new policies. At stores where we have filled in after a manager has left and before new staff have been appointed, there is more room for change. In 2006 at Blackstone which is part of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands in WA, over a seven week tenure, we were able to set up a plan for displaying healthy foods and discontinuing the sale of other items. This was subsequently abandoned as soon as we left on the grounds that it would effect profitability of the store.

At Tjukurla also in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, in late 2008 we were relieving in the community store. A formal policy was drawn up in consultation with community members and Alexandra Walton, a nutrition worker from Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunyatjara Womens Council. The local school and staff, Lis and Poul Mathiasen gave some wonderful support. This 'Healthy Store Policy' was subsequently adopted by a community meeting and signed by three members of the Tjukurla Community council in November 2008. - See Attachment 1. Whilst not as comprehensive as the Mai Wiru Policy we believe it is a start in a region where in the past there has been very little healthy food promotion by community stores. With encouragement from NPY Womens Council, we hope it will be a model for other stores in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands.

A breakdown of a monthly store delivery in two stores in the Martu and Ngaanyatjarra Lands in 2008 gives an indication of the range of goods being sold in a typical remote community store. The disproportionate amount of cigarettes, sweets, packet chips and cool drinks sold is typical of most stores that we have worked in over the past 10 years. This imbalance needs to be addressed particularly when compared with sales of bottled water and fresh fruit and vegetables. - see attachment 2.

Cigarettes and tobacco sales are a real concern when adults interest in smokes is put before childrens needs for quality food. Pressure is often put on store managers not to increase the price of cigarettes when there is a general price rise by wholesalers. A community of 300 people in South Australia spends \$296 000 on cigarettes in a year - see attachment 3.

Promotion of fresh fruit and vegetables is a real challenge when high freight charges are added. We believe all fruit and vegetables should be sold at cost price with freight charges recovered by increasing the price of non essential goods. There is an argument for government subsidies on essential foods, particularly in the more remote stores but any subsidies need to be monitored closely to ensure that they do go to reducing the selling price of the right foods - even to directing the subsidy to the transport company.

### **Store management**

Remote stores as well as other areas of community staffing face a big turnover of managers. The unreal expectations of residents, lack of training or outside support, unexpected electrical and refrigeration breakdowns, long hours with few local store assistants and threats to store staff often resulting from demands for bookup all contribute to managers resigning early. Selection procedures are often not thorough and we regularly see relatives of other community staff appointed to store positions.

Stores in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands have an unwritten agreement to deal through NATS, a Ngaanyatjarra owned buying agency in Perth that does not necessarily provide the best service to communities. We have found that their fresh foods are of inferior quality and prices often higher than foods sourced from Alice Springs. In the past 11 years we have not seen any commitment by NATS to supporting healthy store policies.

The Outback Stores model has a lot going for it and in communities like Imanpa it is working particularly well. If local involvement in decision making and a priority on healthy foods can be guaranteed, then we would recommend that any store consider joining Outback Stores.

Consideration of Government finance for subsidising freight or for upgrading equipment should be tied to sound management, local workers in the store, promotion of healthy foods and training of managers in nutrition.

**Bookup**

Bookup was unheard of in remote stores 40 years ago. Today with more money around, it is even less necessary. Bookup can be the cause of serious conflict between store managers and community members and we have seen individual debts of up to \$7000 being written off as there is no possibility of the money ever being repaid. Key community representatives are often the main recipients of store credit as managers find it embarrassing to say no. Bookup is often linked to holding key cards and pin numbers, specially by private store operators and we believe that neither should be permitted.

**Conclusion**

A successful community depends on a well-run store. There is need for improvement in the management of many remote stores, including the promotion of healthy foods. The NPY Womens Council is doing some excellent work in the tri-state area of NT, WA, and SA but in this region, financial incentives may be the only way that we will see real changes in remote stores. Funding for communities should be tied to sound store management and a commitment to good nutrition.

Margaret and David Hewitt.

8 June 2009

---

## ATTACHMENT 1

### **Tjukurla Community Healthy Store Policy** (This policy may be added to from time to time)

Tjukurla store will sell baby food, water and fresh fruit & vegetables at cost or below cost

Tjukurla Store will stock at least 6 types of fresh fruit year round

Tjukurla Store will stock tinned fruit in natural juice or water only

Tjukurla Store will stock at least 4 different types of white/green vegetables (e.g. zucchini, beans, peas, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower)

Tjukurla Store will stock at least 3 different types of salad vegetables (e.g. tomato, lettuce, capsicum, mushroom, avocado, celery)

Tjukurla Store will stock at least 3 different types of red/yellow vegetables (e.g. corn, carrots, pumpkin, sweet potato)

Tjukurla Store will stock reduced fat, low fat or skim milk (fresh, dried or UHT) in addition to full cream milk

Tjukurla Store will stock evaporated skim milk

Tjukurla Store will stock at least 2 different types of canned beans (e.g. baked beans, 3 bean mix, red kidney beans)

Tjukurla Store will stock at least 5 different types of other canned or frozen vegetables

Tjukurla Store will stock at least 5 lean cut meat options (e.g. Kangaroo, skinless chicken breast/thighs, lean mince, un-battered fish fillets)

Tjukurla Store will stock tinned tuna in spring water or tuna in oil

Tjukurla Store will stock tinned fish (e.g. salmon, sardines, oysters)

Tjukurla Store will only stock "low fat" sausages

Tjukurla Store will stock bowls & spoons suitable for babies

Tjukurla Store will stock at least 1 type of fruit based baby food (6-9 months)

Tjukurla Store will stock at least 1 type of savoury baby food (e.g. meat & vegetables, 6-9 months)

Tjukurla Store will stock at least 1 type of high fibre bread (e.g. Territory High Fibre, Wonder White)

Tjukurla Store will stock Basmati rice (low GI)

Tjukurla Store will stock yoghurt - both full fat and diet choices

Tjukurla store will not use promotional material for unhealthy food and drinks

At least 60% of all drinks (apart from milk drinks and 100% fruit juice) in display fridge will be low sugar drinks (e.g. flavoured water, diet soft drinks, soda water, unflavoured mineral water)

Tjukurla Store will stock 100% fruit juice in small portion packs (250ml or smaller)

Tjukurla Store will only stock Coke, Solo, Sprite and Passiona (and other high sugar drinks) in 600ml size bottles or smaller

Tjukurla Store will not stock energy/high caffeine drinks (e.g. drinks containing guarana)

Only healthy snacks are to be sold on counter top (e.g. packs of sultanas, fresh fruit, boiled eggs, cheese sticks, single fresh fruit)

Tjukurla Store will stock unroasted nuts with no added salt

Tjukurla Store will stock Vegemite and Peanut butter

Tjukurla Store will stock a maximum of 3 varieties/flavours of potato chips, and only in the 50g size or smaller

Tjukurla store will encourage the sale of healthy foods by having them in prominent positions on the shelves, will display good food posters in the store and will support the school's healthy living program.

**Signed** ..... **Date**.....  
**Tjukurla Chairman**

**Signed**..... **Date**.....  
**Tjukurla Council member**

**Signed**..... **Date**.....  
**Tjukurla Council member**

Attachment 2

## Deliveries to Two Remote Community Stores in 2008

	PUNMU	TJUKURLA
Date of delivery	12 May 2008	23 October 2008
Approximate community population	180	70
Value of order	\$89 000	\$37 000
Frequency of order	six weekly	monthly

Percentages of goods in the following categories by wholesale value:

Tinned and packet food (non perishable)	28%	25%
Cigarettes and tobacco	22%	19%
Frozen and fresh meat	11%	11%
Soft drinks, mainly Coke	8%	21%
Kitchen and hardware items	7%	4.5%
Personal care products	4.5%	2.5%
Bread	4%	3.8 %
Car accessories	3.5%	4.5%
Washing powders and detergents	3.2%	2%
Packet potato chips	3%	2%
Lollies and chocolates	3%	1%
Fresh fruit and vegetables	2.5%	3.9%
Bottled water	0.6%	0.2%

---

## Cigarette Sales in Two Remote Stores 2005

### Tjirrkarli WA population 50

448 packets of cigarettes were sold in the community store during one month in 2005

- Average of 9 packets per month for each per man, woman and child.
- \$117 per person for the month (\$13.00 per packet for Winfield Blue cigarettes)
- \$5824 was spent on cigarettes in one month.

**Fresh fruit and vegetables sales for the same month were \$920**

It was expected that in 12 months the community would spend \$75 700 on cigarettes.

### Amata SA population 300

Cigarette sales for one month in 2005 were \$74 000

- Average of 6.5 packets per month for each man, woman and child
- \$82 per person for the month (\$12.60 per packet for Winfield Blue cigarettes)
- \$24 60 was spent on cigarettes in one month

**Fresh fruit and vegetables sales for the same month were \$4920**

It was expected that in 12 months the community would spend \$296 000 on cigarettes.