

3 November 2005

The Secretary
Senate Community Affairs References Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Enclosed is a submission to your enquiry into Petrol Sniffing in Remote Aboriginal Communities.

My wife Margaret and I commenced work in remote communities in 1964 at Amata in South Australia as a registered nurse and building supervisor. Over an 11 year period we also worked at Ernabella in SA, Areyonga and Docker River in Northern Territory and Warburton in Western Australia. In 1975 we moved to the Kimberley region where I was employed by the WA Housing Commission on Aboriginal village housing projects and Margaret continued nursing with the WA Health Department.

In 1986 we left the bush for the Snowy Mountains in NSW. After our daughter had completed High School and University in 1998, we returned to remote communities and for the past 8 years have been relieving staff in the Pitjantjatjara and Ngaanyatjarra Lands, in the Kimberley and at Lake Nash on NT/Qld border.

We were working in a Ngaanyatjarra community during the early days of petrol sniffing there. We have been privileged to work in the Kimberleys and at Lake Nash where it was not a problem and at Kalka in South Australia where community leaders have successfully removed sniffing.

We would be happy to give evidence at public hearings of the committee.

Yours Sincerely,

David Hewitt.

SUBMISSION INTO PETROL SNIFFING IN REMOTE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

Margaret Hewitt and David Hewitt

Some early recollections of sniffing.

In November 1970 while working at Docker River Aboriginal Community in the south west corner of Northern Territory, word came through from Warburton, the nearest community 420 kilometres to the west that young men were sniffing petrol. It was something that we had not encountered in 7 years in remote communities, nor had most Aboriginal people at Docker heard about it. Nobody in the region, Aboriginal leaders, missionaries, medical people or government staff and officials had any answers. This was the beginning in the Western Desert region of an epidemic that has reached into almost all families in the Ngaanyatjarra and Pitjantjatjara Lands over the past 34 years.

Fears were expressed that someone would eventually die from sniffing. The social experts claimed that it might take a death to halt the dramatic increases in sniffing. One of the first deaths in the area was caused by a boy who became unconscious while breathing petrol from a bucket and died with his head in the bucket. Serious burns were sustained by several young people when blankets they were breathing through caught alight. Three men died when a vehicle they were riding in while sniffing, overturned on the edge of their community. None of these tragic incidents prevented the major increase in sniffing through the 1970s.

In 1980 Blackstone Community in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands of WA took the drastic step of introducing an additive, methol mecapitan to the petrol supplies at their store that would make addicts sick if they tried to sniff the fuel. The Community was ordered to cease using the additive because it was indeed making sniffers sick. When discussions commenced in Australia in the early 1990s on the phasing out of leaded (Super) petrol the experts said sniffing would stop as it was the lead in fuel that encouraged sniffing. While there was a choice, sniffers certainly preferred leaded petrol. When the fuel companies went over to unleaded, this became the fuel of choice. It was only when Avgas (or Comgas as it became known) was introduced to the Ngaanyatjarra Lands as a substitute for Unleaded petrol, that there was a change in the sniffing culture.

Through the 1990s Avgas became the driving force in the reduction in sniffing in the Ngaanyatjarra communities several years before the Government introduced the Comgas subsidy scheme. The distance that sniffable petrol would have to be carried from Laverton or beyond, also helped in reducing the incidence of sniffing. Unfortunately many young men had already been affected by years of sniffing and today families are traumatized by unpredictable behaviour, assaults and destruction of property by former sniffers. Community staff is also often concerned by threats from these people who may become upset by the most trivial incident.

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The Western Australian Police based in Laverton made regular patrols through the Ngaanyatjarra Lands and had some excellent initiatives including Blue Light Discos and education of school children that discouraged many young people from taking up sniffing.

On the weekend of the March for Reconciliation across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000, two young men from remote communities died as a result of petrol sniffing. One was a long time sniffer who collapsed and died on the football field. For too long the problem of sniffing had not been taken seriously enough, almost ignored by people deciding the agenda on Aboriginal issues. There was some strange idea that if there were a concentration on Native Title rights, recognition of the Stolen Generation, Reconciliation and Sorry Days, then all the other problems of Aboriginal people would go away. In 1986 a prominent community administrator said that Land Rights would relieve a level of stress - the uncertainty of ownership of land, that he claimed caused petrol sniffing.

The South Australian 1981 Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act gave Anangu secure title to their land in the far north west of the state. Yet sniffing in that area has continued to increase over the past 20 years and in 2004 was probably at its highest level ever.

In 1985 a petrol sniffing prevention team supported by Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments was operating in Alice Springs. That so many efforts have failed in the past implies that we need to take a fresh look at the problem. The feeling in the Bush is that there have been enough enquiries, meetings, workshops, seminars, reports and committees on sniffing - some real action is required in 2005.

Some suggestions for reducing petrol sniffing.

Claims are often made that the answer to substance abuse lays solely the allocation of more money by Governments. Vast amounts of money have already been spent and the funding gap between those communities that have a history of disruption amongst their young people and those that don't is already very wide. Initiatives have included local radio stations, grassed and floodlit football grounds, drop-in centres, indoor swimming pools, community halls, band equipment, gyms, video or pool rooms, basketball courts and provision of vehicles to encourage traditional activities. Some communities that are well balanced and show no anti-social behavior unfortunately miss out on many of these amenities.

No single activity is going to eliminate sniffing though again claims are made that a return to traditional life is the answer, teaching music will produce results or that we will see an art led, or football led recovery. A report in an Alice Springs paper on 19 August 2005 suggests Yoga is the solution to substance abuse in remote communities.

There needs to be a policy incorporating many different approaches and supported by committed youth activity co-coordinators who should be encouraged to stay several years in a community. A community of 200 people might call for male and female co-coordinators

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despite the high cost of wages, vehicles, housing and support. Roving youth workers cannot achieve the same results. Unfortunately we have not seen any communities that have an indigenous person fulfilling this role. The pressures are just too great for use of equipment, vehicles and buildings.

Removal of the Unleaded petrol is not a solution on its own to sniffing. But the Comgas Scheme during the 1990s in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands showed the massive impact that unavailability of a sniffable substance can make. The introduction of Opal has refined the Comgas Scheme and relieved concerns that many people had about using the higher octane Avgas in their modern vehicles.

BP and the Commonwealth Government should be congratulated on the development of Opal fuel. The funding to subsidise the introduction of Opal is a big help to the communities concerned but needs to go a lot further. While relieving store staff in the Pitjantjatjara Lands last December we observed the absolute ease of access in communities to unleaded fuel from Yulara Resort and from roadhouses on the Lasseter and Stuart Highways that were only one to two hours away. We were pleased to see a government media release in September advising that the Opal subsidy will be extended to these roadhouses. However the rollout needs to go a lot further and we strongly suggest that it cover all fuel outlets along the Stuart Highway between Coober Pedy and Tennant Creek, including the town of Alice Springs and across to Laverton and Halls Creek in WA. Opal would be the only grade of petrol available in this area. That it may inconvenience a few motor enthusiasts who will claim they need Premium Unleaded in their vehicles, is a small price to pay for an improvement in the well being of Aboriginal people. We understand that BP is even looking at introducing a Premium Opal fuel.

Having Opal as the only petrol available over nearly 1.2 million square kilometres of Inland Australia will be a great deterrent to sniffing. States should be encouraged to make it an offence to carry Unleaded fuel into any designated community. Tragically, community members are often supplying sniffable substances to their own people, and making a great profit. In one community 12 months ago a 1.25 litre cool drink bottle of petrol was selling for \$20. In a store we were working in a young girl confined to a wheelchair by her sniffing was wheeled into the store with her can beside her - she had been supplied with the petrol by a relative.

The financial cost of care for an increasing number of young people with brain damage from sniffing is enormous, some requiring 24 hour nursing. As many of them are in reasonable physical health, they will live well into adulthood, if they do not revert to sniffing. We know a family with two sons whom I delivered as a midwife who are now being cared for in Alice Springs. A long term investment in the Opal scheme will be repaid many times over in the reduced number of Aboriginal people entering fulltime care. Another increasing problem is the number of nursing mothers or girls with young babies who are sniffing. The cost of care for these infants when mothers become incapable of looking after them is enormous.

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Support and encouragement is needed for local Aboriginal leaders who are often trying desperately to tackle the problems of substance abuse. Unfortunately other communities have just given up and consider it to be a 'white fellows problem'. Introduction of Opal fuel over such a wide area will be a good signal from the Commonwealth Government that it is very serious about combating petrol sniffing.

Unleaded Avgas

This year in Australia the composition of Avgas has been changed to an unleaded version to make it more environmentally friendly. This has also made it sniffable and while not being used in vehicles any more, it is used by piston engine aircraft visiting communities. Some communities carry Avgas in 200 litre drums for supply to aircraft and sniffers could break into containers where drums are stored. A more serious problem is that aircraft standing on an airstrip overnight, particularly as most airstrips are away from the community could be damaged in the quest to obtain fuel for sniffing.

Non-sniffing Communities

Many communities specially through the Kimberleys of Western Australia and in eastern part of Northern Territory have never experienced petrol sniffing and sell Unleaded petrol through their stores. From our observations, most of the people in these communities come from a cattle station background where there was a hierarchy of authority, not necessarily in the traditional sense, and/or have a strong Indigenous Christian leadership. In addition, the communities usually have long term and supportive staff, high level of school attendance, a strong work ethic amongst adults and better health. We have seen very concerned community members mounting a 24 hour watch on an entrance gate if they have the slightest suspicion of alcohol or drugs coming into the community.

Finally, the introduction of Opal as the only Unleaded fuel available over a very wide area of Inland Australia will be the biggest single factor in reduction and hopefully eradication after more than 35 years, of petrol sniffing.

Margaret Hewitt

David Hewitt

Tjirrkarli Community, WA
2 November 2005