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**SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO PETROL SNIFFING IN REMOTE
ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES**

23 February 2005

This submission seeks to address one of the three matters of inquiry before the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, namely, 2(b) *the effectiveness of diversionary initiatives and community level activities.*

From October 2004 to December 2005 I conducted anthropological research with young people at Docker River, a Pitjantjatjara Aboriginal community in the far south-west of the Northern Territory. My ongoing doctoral research focuses on youth identity and socialisation. A primary component of the way I have undertaken my research has been participation in the development of the Youth Programme at Docker River. Based on this experience, I would like to offer for consideration by the Committee a case study in the effectiveness of youth diversionary programmes.

1. Background

Prior to the introduction of the Docker River Youth Programme at the end of 2004, the total number of individuals sniffing petrol in the community numbered thirty. Fifteen of this number were long-term, chronic petrol sniffers. These individuals sniff petrol constantly throughout the day and night, and are prominent in the community for their sniffing and other related attention seeking behaviour. The majority of individuals in this group derive from two main family groups. Eleven of this number were experimental sniffers, that is, those who try out petrol sniffing on one or more occasions. This category of individuals sniff covertly and opportunistically, usually at night, or not in public view. The remaining four individuals were regular sniffers, that is, someone who is known to sniff regularly but not continuously.

During this period there was a complete absence of youth activities in the community. Whilst some after school hours care facilities aimed at younger primary age children had been operating for a time during 2003, the departure of the volunteer worker and vandalism and destruction of the newly established facilities left the fledgling programme devastated. The schooling environment, particularly for secondary students, was highly unstable as the regional independent Aboriginal college struggled with staff inexperience and retention levels, internal politics, and underresourcing and funding problems. For some periods of time during the school year, no teacher was available to teach students at the home campus at Docker River.

A change in community governance personnel (at both administrative and local Council levels) had given rise to weakened community leadership, creating increased tolerance of sniffing in the community. According to senior community members, previous leaders did not permit open sniffing in the community – cans were removed and the contents tipped out. In late 2003 a popular young woman was murdered by her husband during an episode of intensive substance misuse. The ramifications of this death remained a source of tension in the community.

These conditions created a favourable environment for the proliferation of petrol sniffing. The role played by the ringleaders of the group of sniffers, who exploited these favourable conditions, is paramount. At the core of the group are two brothers, one aged 37 and the other 34. Both men have been sniffing petrol (including leaded petrol) since adolescence. These brothers are responsible for organising the regular supply of petrol to the community, and for the promulgation and promotion of the practice of sniffing.

The younger brother is the recognised leader of the gang of sniffers. A charismatic and intelligent leader, he has achieved a significant amount of notoriety. Both within the community, and with authorities, his role as ‘king’ of the sniffers is broadly known. He is proud of his nickname ‘Ned Kelly’, given to him by local and Alice Springs police for his demonstrated ability to continually elude the authorities. The ‘king’ of the sniffers manages an efficient petrol supply system, whereby he departs Docker River regularly on pay day, to travel to Yulara in order to fill jerry cans with unleaded petrol. Other petrol sniffers subsidise his trip, and provide him with jerry cans of their own to be filled. Additional petrol is sold and exchanged on the return to the community. When lacking money to undertake these supply trips, the ‘king’ drives to the edge of Uluru/Kata Tjuta National Park, where he simulates a vehicle ‘break-down’ in order to prevail upon passing tourist traffic to give him petrol.

The ‘king’ of sniffers also supplies young people for free in order to recruit them to the lifestyle of petrol sniffers, thereby gaining not only substantiation of the sniffer group but also sexual access, and benefits from petty acts of vandalism committed by young male recruits.

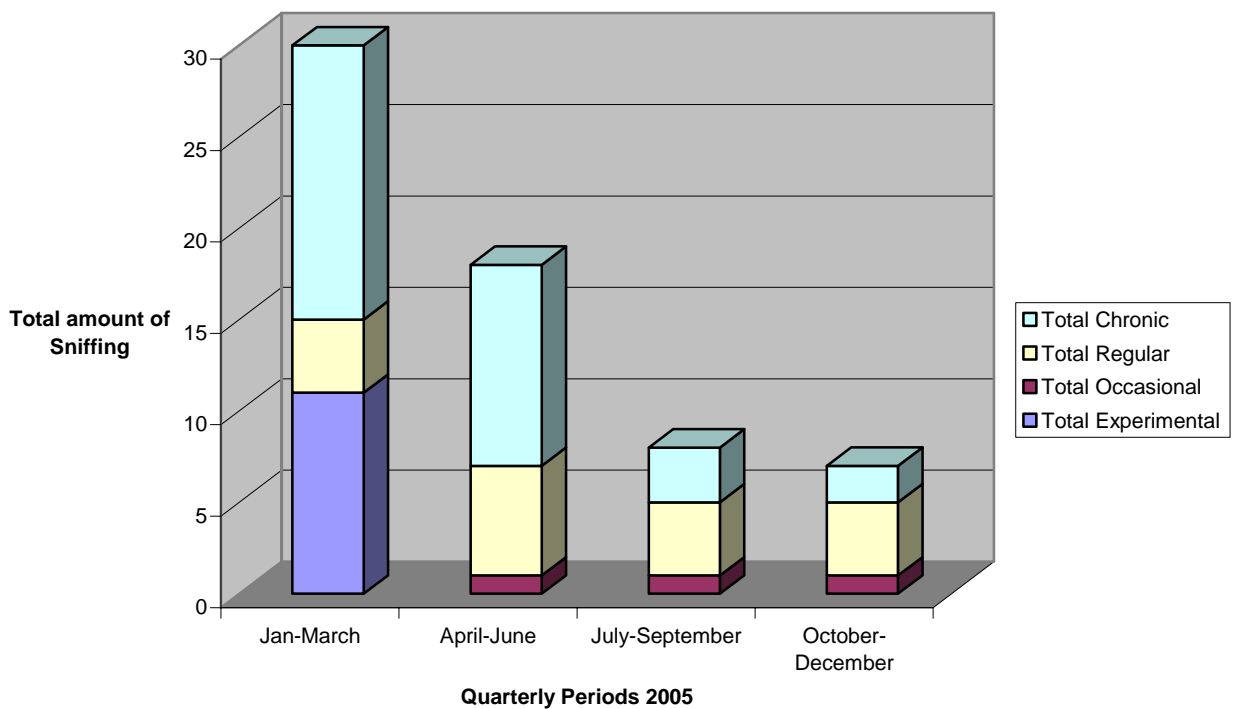
Data recorded at quarterly intervals over 2005 (see table below) is indicative of the degree of influence the ‘king’ and his gang of chronic sniffers had over young people. Of the eleven young people who were experimenting with petrol sniffing during the period before the establishment of the regular Youth Programme, nine of this number were young women. The average age of these girls is fourteen. In the absence of any other stimulating activities, young people were drawn to the excitement and diversions proffered by the ‘king’. In addition to the opportunity to get high for free, the ‘king’ also provided: private ‘sniffer’ parties at his house, at a number of bush locations, and during the night, trips in his vehicle around the community or to Yulara, the opportunities to meet and socialise with sniffers from other communities, including the opportunity to form and engage in illicit sexual relationships. In short, he offered what constituted the only real ‘recreation’ programme available.

Following the inception of a busy, vibrant and stable Youth Programme, experimental petrol sniffing dropped off altogether (see table). Initially, the ‘king’ indicated that he viewed the youth programme as operating in active opposition to his goal of

maintaining the viability and membership of the petrol sniffing lifestyle. The message iterated by the 'king' was that the youth programme and the sniffers were in competition with respect to the attention of young people, and that he would protect, with force if necessary, what he considered to be his interests. Thereafter he began a campaign of hostile defiance, threatening through his antagonistic and sometimes violent behaviour youth workers, youth programme activities, and particularly young people themselves.

From June 2005 onwards, the number of experimental sniffers has remained zero, with chronic sniffing levels also decreasing substantially. Finding his power base significantly removed, the 'king' moved to a different community around June 2005. A few chronic sniffers, who chose to stay in Docker River due to the sympathetic environment provided by the 'king', also drifted away. Numbers in the regular category of sniffing rose slightly from March onwards, however these numbers represent individuals who were sniffing at chronic levels during the 'reign' of the 'king', and who continued sniffing at a reduced rate once the programme of 'king' also diminished.

Total Sniffing Over 2005



2. The Docker River model

The unique Youth Programme model developed at Docker River is based on a platform of regular, consistent activities for children and young people between the ages of 3 to 30, and focuses on the provision of **meaningful, culturally relevant, gender and age status appropriate activities**. The model features separate activities for children (*tjitjis*) age 3 – 11, young women (*kungkas*) and young men (*watis* or *yungpala*) aged 12 upwards. This upholds Pitjantjatjara social obligations for newly initiated young men to distinguish themselves in behaviour and practice from uninitiated boys and younger children as their newly acquired status requires. Similarly, gender separation at adolescence is observed and activities developed for categories of young men or young women accordingly. All activities are aimed in the promotion of self-esteem and coherence for young people in their lives with their families.

3. The Youth Team

The capacity to provide these relevant and stimulating activities relies heavily on the involvement, guidance, and support from a Youth Team – a volunteer group of young leaders who are the key drivers of the activities and ideas which make up the Youth Programme. These young men and women represent the voice of young people within the community and are crucial role models for the younger family members who follow their example. Selection of new members of the Youth Team is made by existing members, with some young people trialled initially on probationary status until they have proven their suitability for the role. The Youth Team and the two Youth Workers meet regularly to discuss all details involved in the operation of the Youth Programme, including planning upcoming events, discussing issues or problems which may have arisen with the programme or with individual young people. This forum also serves as an entry point for any and all youth related business, so that both community members or external service providers who have a matter to discuss regarding young people in Docker River, are able to consult with the Youth Team.

Whilst the Youth Team work in this instance as volunteers, it is envisaged that their role become formalised in the future, with members of the Youth Team receiving wages for the time they work. Currently Youth Team members are paid for their involvement in large-scale events only, such as sports carnivals, long trips, or youth festivals. They are generally paid through a store voucher system. Symbolic recognition of their role is also undertaken wherever possible, and a position on the Youth Team has become a sought-after role.

4. Youth Workers

The Docker River model entails an ongoing staff of one male and one female youth worker. These positions are funded through different bodies with different funding arrangements. One position is funded through the NT Police Juvenile Diversion Unit, and the other through the Federal Family and Community Services Reconnect Programme, administered by the NPY Women's Council. Whilst the duties, responsibilities and accountabilities of each position differ according to the nature of the funded project, the goals of each project are essentially the same: to work with

young people at risk and to develop strategies and interventions which decrease petrol sniffing and other harmful behaviours. It was the decision of the youth workers on the ground at Docker River to coordinate their work so that the achievements of each, and the results for the young people on the community, could be greater.

Youth workers need to be multi-skilled: at Docker River they hunt and butcher camels, cook, coach and umpire sports teams, cut hair, paint murals, build waterslides, choreograph dance routines, DJ, drive 4WDs across long and rugged distances, maintain and repair equipment and infrastructure, provide crisis support and care, mentoring, referrals, health treatments and counselling and support to young people and their families. A substantial amount of administration, planning and reporting is also required of youth workers, including particularly the rigours of applying for ongoing funding grants. Their working day is typically begins at 8 and ends with the closure of the Recreation Hall between 9.30 and 12, depending on the night of the week. Weekends are busier than weekdays, with daytrips and overnight trips to organise and implement. Needless to say, this requires enthusiasm, commitment, and energy.

5. Resources and Infrastructure

The main base for the Youth Programme is a multi-functional Youth Centre, or Recreation Hall, which is operated and run by the Youth Team together with the male and female Youth Worker. The Recreation Hall is frequented by anywhere between 30 and 150 young people on any one evening, and is open every night except Sunday. It is a large multi-purpose building with the main open space being used for indoor sports and games. A built-on addition contains a pool room, computer room, and BRACS (remote aboriginal broadcasting) radio room. There is a secure storeroom for equipment, a stage, and well-used kitchen. It must be said that few of these facilities (except perhaps our new stainless steel pool tables) could be considered to meet even basic standards of mainstream recreation infrastructure. The resources and equipment used by the Youth Programme, especially during its establishment phase, are typically borrowed, donated, improvised and locally produced, and maintained by the Youth Team and youth workers.

The Programme is fortunate in being funded to operate two Toyota troop carrier vehicles, which enables the maintenance of our gender separate activities – one Toyota for girls, and one for boys and young men.

6. Activities

A range of activities takes place within the centre, including movie and disco nights, karaoke and game boy, pool competitions, indoor soccer, volleyball, basketball and cricket, gym equipment, boxing and martial arts, mural painting, art and craft, special events, such as fashion parades and concerts, and more. Cooking is a core part of the programme, with young people preparing and cooking nutritious ‘camel’ meals three nights every week. Located in a region which has the highest density of feral camels in Australia, the usage of camel meat enables all young people to eat for free. Young men are responsible for the hunting and butchering of the camels we use, and our young women prepare camel stews, chilli con carne, camel curries, spaghetti camel, camel burgers, and once a week, camel pizza, for sale and delivery to their families.

Any monies raised are returned to buy basic ingredients for next week's camel meals. The health benefits to hungry kids have been tangible; Docker River's Territory Health Service reports that in October 2004, 75% of children aged 5-15 were anaemic, this fell to 50% in March 2005 and by October 2005 had further dropped to 30%, which matches normal population levels for anaemia in children of this age group. Many of these children were also underweight, and suffered from developmental disorders. Whilst mothers and grandmothers in the community have commented with pleasure that their children are 'getting fat from camel', anecdotal evidence from the Health clinic suggests that even those children who suffered from extremes of underdevelopment are now continuing to grow at normal levels along the scale of their particular growth curve.

A project designed specifically for young women 'Kungka Ninti, Kungka Rikina' (Smart Girls are Deadly Girls), is illustrative of the way our programme works. Focusing on personal development, positive adolescent health, and the fostering of self esteem, this project includes many outings and workshops led by older female family members, from hair and beauty to bush tuckering techniques. A large fashion parade was held last summer at which the young women presented themselves to the community, having staged the publicity, organised the music, lighting, and decoration and cooked camel stew for the entire community. This event, a public display of youthful identity, cultivated in the young women a strong sense of pride, stemming mainly from the consciousness that what they were doing made their families proud. Adolescents feel keenly the desire to gain the attention of their families, and youth programmes need to be directed towards achieving this goal in a positive way.

7. Intergenerational Activities and Support

A range of intergenerational activities is also supported by the Youth Programme, including day trips and camps every weekend for bush tuckering, hunting, damper making, *inma* (ritual) training, seed and bush medicine collection, artefact (such as digging sticks, spears, boomerangs) making, and involvement in land management work. These trips always consist of young people together with senior members of their families, and are aimed in fostering intergenerational transmission of knowledge and strong intergenerational relationships.

8. School Holiday Programmes

Additional activities, usually in the form of externally supplied workshops, are of vital importance to maintaining the stimulating environment for young people during school holiday periods. Particularly during the summer, the length of vacation and the extremes of heat can easily induce high levels of boredom, and outbreaks of sniffing are known to occur. Additional activities and new experiences which supplement the ongoing regular daily pattern of the Youth Programme are required to allay this potential boredom, and to assist youth workers over this period.

9. Young Men

The need to provide meaningful and consistent activities to the different categories of young people presents ongoing practical challenges in the operation of the Youth Programme. The cultural expectation for young initiated men to distinguish

themselves from the non-initiated (even when they may be only 15, with some as young as 13) is supported in the Youth Programme through developing exclusive and relevant activities for the group of young initiated men.

Once an activity has been identified as 'for *tjitjis*', or for the younger boys, this effectively prohibits the young men from engaging in the same activity. In addition, initiated young men immediately cease school attendance, and are therefore even more critically in need of meaningful occupation. We have therefore sought to engage young men in music programmes, film-making projects, hunting and land management projects. We have additionally sought to involve them in martial arts workshops, and as assistants, as coaches and as leaders of other activities involving younger age groups. Our capacity to provide this level of exclusive activities is only in the developing stages.

10. Summary

As the table in Section 1 clearly shows, the Docker River Youth Programme can claim to have been instrumental in eliminating experimental petrol sniffing (typically 10-15 age group) in the community. It has also decreased the rate of chronic sniffing, by making the environment much less favourable to senior sniffers and diverting younger sniffers away from the sniffing recruitment process. The direct correlation between the provision of **meaningful, consistent, gender and age status appropriate activities** and the decrease of petrol sniffing is clear.

In conclusion, it must be added that the establishment of an environment in which this model can remain viable also requires the following:

- *The recruitment and retention of skilled and committed youth workers, who are capable of understanding the complexities of Aboriginal family life.*
The problems associated with the lack of a stable youth workforce across Aboriginal communities have been noted by recent coronial inquiries and elaborated further elsewhere.
- *The support of the local community.*
The Youth Team is a fundamental component to the success of this model. The role played by this group of young leaders ensures that youth programme initiatives are locally driven and not externally imposed. The Youth Team is also vital in ensuring an awareness and observance of local cultural protocols, community tensions and familial dynamics which youth workers from outside may overlook. In addition, good communication and collaboration between youth workers and local councils, senior administrative officers and Aboriginal leaders, as well as family members is paramount.
- *The support of an external, central coordinating youth advocacy body.*
Policies directed at petrol sniffing and youth diversion have typically emphasised the need for 'community responsibility'. This assumes a high degree of community capacity, when communities are frequently fractured, riven by internal family politics and by dysfunctional administration. In addition, community administrative systems are usually overburdened and unable to provide youth workers with the requisite support they need in order

to maintain the delivery of youth services. This places the sustainability of youth programmes at risk.

An external coordination body for youth services, such as the existing CAYLUS (Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service) is able to perform critical youth services such as recruitment, training, worker support, regional coordination, lobbying, networking and youth advocacy. Community councils alone are unable or ill-equipped to supply this level of servicing. This existence of this body thereby acts as a safeguard to ensure that youth programmes, their funding, or their workers do not flounder along with the vacillations of community functionality. Ultimately, it is the young people who stand to lose most.

The underlying assumption of the majority of community youth programme models is that Aboriginal kids have the same aspirations, needs and interests as mainstream Australian kids. Premised on the isolation of young people from their families, where role models and activities alike are drawn from popular culture, the use of mainstream youth programmes as the operational model is assimilationist in the assumption that Aboriginal kids want to be just like white society. In addition the provision of youth services in Aboriginal communities is ad hoc, irregular, and stuck in the 'Sport and Recreation' approach to youth work.

The experience at Docker River shows that models which envisage a category of 'youth' isolated from intergenerational structures of socialisation, from mothers and fathers, uncles, and grandmothers, are culturally inadequate. Youth programmes that seek to decrease levels of petrol sniffing, and to provide young people with meaningful alternatives, must support these crucial socialisation processes.

The ongoing objective of the Docker River Youth Programme, as articulated by one of our young leaders, is 'to make young people, and their families, proud'. The accomplishment of this goal effectively enables the development of strong youthful identities; the development of healthy, coherent and meaningful young lives.