

## **Submission to Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee inquiry into the Low Aromatic Fuel Bill 2012**

My name is Andrew Stojanovski. I spent 11 years in the remote Aboriginal community of Yuendumu NT working on petrol sniffing issues, setting up the Mt Theo Petrol Sniffing Prevention Program.

In 2007 I was awarded the Order of Australia Medal for this work.

Mt Theo is nationally recognised as best practice for a community development program that dealt with sniffing. When we began half the teenagers in Yuendumu were sniffers, eight long years later no one sniffed in Yuendumu and the ex-sniffers had gone on to become youth leaders in the community, working on projects to ensure that the next generation of teenagers wouldn't want to sniff.

One of the biggest causes of the petrol sniffing is the easy availability of something to sniff that makes you high. Other issues are peer group pressure, youth boredom and community disadvantage.

To use a fire fighting analogy: just as fire needs fuel, heat and oxygen, petrol sniffing has a similar triangle: it needs fuel (petrol), bored young people and community disadvantage. You can put out a fire by depriving it of either: fuel, heat or oxygen.

You can stop sniffing by addressing community disadvantage, dealing with issues of youth boredom, or taking away the petrol.

Up until Opal was introduced in Central Australia I expected that I would spend my career working on petrol sniffing, community by community. There was incredible community and professional pressure on me to take the Mt Theo solution to petrol sniffing and set up similar programs in other communities using a grass roots, ground up approach. Using the Mt Theo model I expected that it would take a decade's work in each community to defeat sniffing. Over my career the best I could hope for using this approach would be to eradicate sniffing in four communities over a period of forty years.

I have to say Opal changed my life. The Mt Theo solution to sniffing was very hard to implement, and extremely hard to replicate. When we told our story at conferences to government and Indigenous leaders, who wanted to know the secret to our success, they would walk away shaking their heads, saying that what we did was too difficult to reproduce. They claimed the level of personal and community commitment was too much to expect from professional paid program staff, and was not something a government program could replicate.

In contrast Opal is a solution that governments and communities can readily implement. Its use in Central Australia has really taken the pressure off communities and provides a breathing space where community workers can actually focus on programs that address the personal and social issues underlying petrol sniffing. When sniffing is rife in a community it is near impossible to do this, the power, violence and dysfunction caused by sniffing is too overwhelming.

Opal has the ability to effectively reduce the level of sniffing in a short period of time, providing a window of opportunity for real community development. In contrast it may take a decade to achieve a similar reduction in sniffing using a community development approach based on best practice models.

To use the fire fighting analogy again, Opal is like a high pressure water hose that allows the fire to be put out quickly so that mopping up and rebuilding can take place.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Stojanovski OAM

Founder of the Mt Theo Petrol Sniffing Prevention Program

Author of the book: “Dog Ear Café: How the Mt Theo Program beat the curse of Petrol Sniffing”