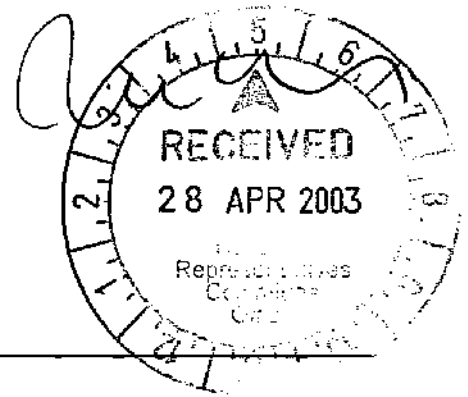




Rebekah Doley
Consultant Psychologist



Secretary of the Australian Bushfire Inquiry
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

24 April 2003

Dear Sir / Madam

This letter is to introduce myself as a criminal behaviour analyst and consulting psychologist, specialising in the analysis of arson¹. Currently, I am undertaking a combined Master of Psychology (Clinical) / Ph. D. program at The Flinders University of South Australia studying the issue of deliberate firesetting with a view to identifying alternative strategies for better managing this crime in Australia at both state and national levels². Previously, I completed a major research project focusing on the criminal behaviour analysis of arson at The University of Liverpool (U.K.) while completing my Master of Science (Investigative Psychology).

As a result of my work in this area I have been awarded the Queens Trust Award (1995) and CFS/S.A. Great Training and Research Award (1995, 1998, 1999, 2000). The media as well as operational and investigating agencies regularly seek my opinion on various aspects of arson and most recently I appeared on the ABC Four Corners program pertaining to bushfire arson (24 Feb 2003). Currently I lecture in psychological aspects of arson with Charles Sturt University (Goulburn) and consult to organizations both in Australia and overseas on the issue of serial arson. Of particular significance to the current inquiry is the fact that, to my knowledge, I am the only person who has conducted empirical research in Australia incorporating the issue of bushfire arson and I am also the only published researcher to have extensively utilised face – to – face interviews with Australian convicted arson offenders as part of my methodology.

There are significant problems associated with understanding arson. Currently there is no complete explanation for why people light fires. Perhaps more importantly, there is no explanation for why people keep lighting fires once they start. My research shows however, that

¹ For a complete list of publications and speaking engagements refer Appendix A.

² An outline of the current research program is included in Appendix B.

most arsonists are serial offenders, regardless of whether they have a previous recorded arson conviction or not, and that there is a hard core within that group who will not desist from firesetting.

This submission is focused on drawing attention to the significant deficits in our general knowledge about arson offenders in Australia and advocates the establishment of a nationally coordinated research program to address issues specific to the Australian arson scene. In particular I highlight the requirement for a greater understanding of the elements of bushfire arson, the need for appropriate treatment and rehabilitation services for adult arsonists, and improved national data collection and analysis procedures to enable a more accurate picture of arson in Australia to be obtained. My recommendations have application in community education, risk assessment for offenders, and the development of predictive models of firesetting that could enable more specialised early intervention programs targeting bushfire arson tendencies. I would be pleased to expand on any of the points raised here at a later opportunity.

Yours sincerely

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Overview

Arson³ has always been an elusive crime, difficult to detect and control. Deliberate firesetting costs the Australian community in the region of \$500 million per year and recent crime trends indicate it is not getting any easier to manage this offence in Australia. Over the last decade arson rates nationally have continued to escalate while the number of arson offences cleared has remained relatively static. The fact that the latest available statistics concerning the cost and prevalence of this crime are at least four years out of date suggests that the picture we have of arson in our community may be limited in significant ways. Due to difficulties in researching this issue we know most about the incompetent arsonist (i.e., the ones that get caught) and we know very little about specific aspects of arson that might be unique to the Australian setting, such as bushfire arsonists. This submission is focused on drawing attention to the significant deficits in our general knowledge about arson offenders in Australia and advocates the establishment of a nationally co-ordinated research program to address issues specific to the Australian arson scene.

Introduction

Arsonists are obscure characters. Relatively little is known of their habits and behaviours or about how these individuals differ, if at all, from other types of offenders. Most of what we know about arson is derived from overseas data, however my research has found cross-cultural differences between the characteristics of some firesetters. This would suggest that the generalisability of international findings to our domestic situation is limited.

There are other, equally serious, gaps in the literature concerning arson behaviour. First, the factors that differentiate arsonists from other offenders are still being identified. Second, the factors that differentiate arsonists from each other are also still under investigation. Finally, an explanation of arson that addresses both the question of why an individual is drawn to fire and why, having lit a fire, he or she would then continue to commit arson has yet to be established.

There is also a clear imbalance in the arson literature that orients research findings primarily towards a clinical focus. The field is also fraught with methodological problems which qualify many of the conclusions that can be drawn from previous research efforts. The main issue being the extent to which study samples are representative of the total arsonist population. Most arson studies utilise samples from easy to access populations, such as psychiatric patients or individuals referred for pre-trial forensic psychiatric assessment, which are arguably not representative of the general arsonist population. Furthermore, very few studies into arson have used data that was collected for the express purpose of addressing the research questions. Consequently, much of what is known about arson today has been guided by the information collected as standard in in-patient settings and pre-trial assessments which tells us something about psychiatrically disturbed people who light fires, but perhaps not much about the "ordinary" or typical arsonist in the general community.

These problems are compounded when applied to the Australian setting by the fact that data on arson and arson offenders in Australia is difficult to obtain and problematic to interpret. The legal definition of the crime differs across policing jurisdictions making it difficult to interpret statistical trends. Moreover, there is little consistency in the nature and extent of data captured by relevant authorities which often precludes sound statistical analysis and comparisons. Finally, there is a perception that the problem is too large to manage and, in combination with the

³ The terms "arson" and "firesetting" will be used interchangeably throughout this discussion. Arson is a legal definition while firesetting describes the behaviour itself.

difficulties in locating and accessing data, this has resulted in very little scientific research exploring the issue in Australia to date.

Call For A National Research Approach

This submission calls for the establishment of a nationally co-ordinated body responsible for the development of initiatives into managing arson generally, and bushfire arson in particular, in Australia. This body should incorporate industry experts as well as academic researchers to ensure findings are scientifically reliable and valid but are also applicable in a practical setting. This approach has been implemented in the United Kingdom and the United States to some effect.

1. Development Of A National Arson Research Database

Recommend that a national research project is established to investigate the psychological aspects of bushfire arson, including:

- why people light bushfires (focus on what factors lead to pathological firesetting)
- why people continue to light bushfires (focus on recidivistic arson)
- why people desist from bushfire - lighting
- bushfire arsonist offender characteristics
- bushfire arson offence features
- links between offender and offence features.

These aspects are equally applicable and relevant to a more general enquiry into arson in Australia.

The resultant data would be maintained in a national database and have a wide range of applications in both the mental health and investigative fields. Apart from addressing the significant deficit of available information about Australian bushfire arson behaviour, extending what is known about arsonists and their behaviour will help to develop models that might predict onset of arson offending and that assess risk of further arson offending. Furthermore, understanding the links that exist between certain arson features and the personal characteristics of offenders will assist in the development of typologies that can be used by fire investigators to facilitate the detection and apprehension of arsonists.

2. Adoption Of A National Best Practice Model

Recommend that a study project be formed to determine a Best Practice model for the education and treatment of child pathological firesetters.

Traditionally, the focus in Australia has been on educating children with a view to preventing potential pathological firesetting behaviour. Fire Authorities in each jurisdiction in Australia offer community education programs that target children at home and at school. These programs are operated independently in each State or Territory and are frequently co-ordinated and staffed by fire personnel on a volunteer basis. The extent to which each of the programs is assessed and validated varies widely across jurisdictions. There are no national statistics available to determine the effectiveness or otherwise of any of these programs in Australia.

3. Provision Of Specialised Rehabilitation And Treatment Programs For Adult Arsonists

Recommend that a study project be formed to investigate the availability and effectiveness of treatment programs for adult firesetters currently being applied overseas.

The extent to which arsonists repeat the offence is the subject of some confusion in the literature. Estimates of arson recidivism range from 4% to 46%. Typically, however, approximately 30% of arsonists have more than one conviction for firesetting. Clearly some convicted arsonists do continue to set fires and these individuals are unlikely to cease of their own volition. Currently there is no specialised treatment or rehabilitation program available for adult arsonists in Australia. This limits the opportunities for convicted arsonists to desist from further firesetting.

4. Promote Research Into Specialised Aspects Of Arson Offending

Recommend that resources are made available to suitable individuals / organisations to research specific aspects of deliberate firesetting.

There are many aspects of arson beyond characteristics of either the individual or the offence that have not been adequately addressed in the arson literature. These include issues such as filicide by fire, suicide by fire, Aboriginal arson, and the effect of media involvement on arson. An understanding of these types of issues will be of benefit to a range of service industries including, but not limited to, health professionals, community educators, welfare groups, and fire investigators.

5. Firefighter Arson

Implement appropriate psychological screening for all career and volunteer firefighters.

Recent reports in the popular press indicate as many as 15 fires have been lit in Australasia by firefighters (refer ABC Four Corners Report 24 Feb 03). Although the incidence of firefighter arson is relatively rare in comparison with the total number of currently serving firefighters, the impact on community faith and Service morale is disproportionately great. In some instances the arsonist is a longstanding or senior member of the Brigade. The emotional fall-out for other members who have trained and worked alongside these individuals is not to be underestimated. Many describe their reaction as devastating and are incredulous at the betrayal of professional trust that is involved when a firefighter deliberately lights fires. In 1998 the issue was raised publicly for the first time at a national conference of Fire Service personnel from Australia and New Zealand (AFAC Conference, Hobart, Tasmania). Clearly, Fire Services are becoming concerned about the threat to their credibility and integrity that is posed by such incidents. The issue of firefighter arson is controversial and emotive. However, in these days of economic rationalization it is necessary for Fire Services to view community safety as a higher priority than their natural desire to ignore an unpleasant reality. Firefighter selection processes generally, and particularly for volunteers, requires updating⁴.

Terms Of Reference

These initiatives support the following Terms of Reference:

- a. the extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities
- c. the adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control

⁴ There are two instruments available world-wide that have been designed specifically for the screening of firefighter applicants for arson tendencies. See Appendix C for an overview of these instruments.

- e. any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation
- h. the adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions
- j. the roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors.

Conclusion

Understanding more about bushfire arson in particular, and arson more generally, will assist in developing more appropriate and targeted responses such as target hardening strategies and community education programs. The more we understand about why people light bushfires and what keeps them doing it, the better directed will be treatment and rehabilitation programs offered to convicted offenders. Developing a greater insight into the role of desistance in firesetting may also have policy implications for the criminal justice system. Learning more about the victims of arson generally and the factors involved in the choice of location for bushfire arson offences will enable us to develop a clearer picture of how this type of criminal behaviour is affecting our community. A national approach to investigating and implementing arson management strategies is required. The information currently available on arson and on bushfires in particular, is difficult to locate and differences in collection practices make many comparisons across jurisdictions meaningless. For an accurate picture of bushfire arson patterns in Australia a nationally co-ordinated research program staffed by industry experts and academics is required.