

Submission to Community Affairs References Committee Senate Inquiry on Petrol Sniffing

Recently I have seen Aboriginal children sniffing petrol in Brisbane. This is going to be very hard to address in this urban environment, and it is alarming to see that it has arrived here, but I believe the government can take action to help eradicate the practice in outback Australia. In the Brisbane urban environment clearly we will need a combination of diversionary initiatives and community level activities. But it is hard to see how it can be combatted without systemic change that would bring about some semblance of equity in our society, without creating a society in which these children would have a chance.

Petrol sniffing is killing and injuring the brains of hundreds of young Aboriginal People in the Central Deserts region of Australia. It is clear therefore that the existing laws and policing with respect to petrol sniffing in affected Indigenous communities are ineffective. The communities are not able, alone, to deal with this. Something else must be done.

There are some success stories, some communities where petrol sniffing has been significantly reduced, and lessons can be learned from these. One element of this has been the introduction of Opal fuel.

Opal fuel is a new non-sniffable petrol that could reduce sniffing if it were the only fuel available across the region, especially in the major towns like Alice Springs and Tennant Creek.

It would cost around \$10 million per annum to do this - less than 1% of the \$3 billion in fuel subsidies going to mining companies, farmers and others through the energy grants scheme. It is a fraction of the future costs of caring for people who are physically and intellectually disabled from sniffing.

Opal is not a stand-alone solution but is a proven and effective part of community-focused strategies to reduce sniffing. Over 700 young people are sniffing in the Central Deserts region.

Petrol is usually the cheapest drug of choice for young people in remote communities. It is heinous in its effects. Many users have sustained Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) and serious physical disabilities. A few are in full time supported care, while families, often ageing parents, bear the burden of caring for others. The cost of care for an individual with permanent disabilities caused by sniffing is up to \$250,000 per year.

Recent figures in 2004* show that on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands in the far north-west of South Australia alone, 8.4% of the population – 222 out of around 2700 - were sniffing petrol. *(Nganampa Health Council).

There are at least 600 petrol sniffers in the Central Desert Region and in some areas up to ten per cent of the population is sniffing.

There is a very high level of violence and general dysfunction amongst petrol sniffers. Sniffing greatly reduces sexual inhibition, which in turn causes a number of problems including STDs and unplanned pregnancies.

A recent evaluation of the COMGAS Scheme found that 'the principal factor affecting the supply of petrol to a community is the proximity of the nearest source.' (Dpt Health & Ageing, 2004:33).

I write to urge the federal government to support and finance the provision of Opal Fuel to all affected communities.

Dr Jennifer Tannoch-Bland

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