

28th October, 2005

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

Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing in Remote Aboriginal Communities

Introduction

Yirara College of the Finke River Mission is a boarding school for secondary aged indigenous students from communities in central Australia and the wider Northern Territory region. The current enrolment is around 220 students, all indigenous, and most board at the Alice Springs campus. Yirara College also operates two campuses away from Alice Springs in the remote communities of Kintore and Willowra.

Approximately 25% of the student population, mostly male students, would be regarded as either sniffing regularly when at home on holidays, or at high risk of sniffing. The majority of these students come from the Western Desert communities of Papunya, Haast Bluff, Mt Liebig and Kintore, and some from Hermannsburg and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara of SA.

Partnership with BP Australia

Towards the end of 2003, Yirara College was approached by BP Australia to work in a partnership to assist students from Papunya (a remote indigenous community 250 km west of Alice Springs) who were sniffing petrol to return to school - so began the "Return to School Program". The philosophy of the program being to develop different programmes to keep the students at school and thereby reduce their likelihood of petrol sniffing.

A key element involved linking the Return to School Program to a series of diversionary camps for young Indigenous people. The first camp - run jointly by Yirara College and Teen Challenge - took place in December 2003 and was attended by 11 young people. Of the 11 to attend the camp, 8 then commenced school at the beginning of 2004 at Yirara College. As the year unfolded more students came into the program, with Yirara College undertaking a number of extra measures to accommodate these students, including the development of a committee to develop on-going programs for these students.

A substantial part of the program was the forming of a committee of staff which has met, once a fortnight, over the past two years to discuss and implement a range of ideas to assist students at risk of sniffing petrol to stay at school. Different things were trialled – one of the most significant being the leasing of an outstation near Hermannsburg, staffed by a Yirara houseparent, to accommodate students at risk who had difficulty staying at Yirara. There have been regular meetings with families and community members in Papunya, and discussions with community and government organizations in central Australia, all with the view to gaining a better understanding, and forming various networks to assist students at risk.

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In August, we were advised that Yirara had received an encouragement award in the "multi-state" section of the **Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Community Business Partnerships** for our role in working with BP to help students at risk.

What lessons have we learned along the way?

1. Yirara College has had some success with students at risk of sniffing petrol if they returned to school. However, Yirara has little control over what students do during holidays or if they refuse to return to school.
2. When the College has tried to engage the community of Papunya in discussion in order to work collaboratively to combat petrol sniffing there has been little success because the community is so dysfunctional, and there is a high turnover of non-indigenous staff and many programmes are funded for only short periods of time.
3. Children and teenagers most at risk of sniffing generally come from dysfunctional families where there is a high degree of other substance abuse, and there is inadequate care for children. In other words, petrol sniffing has to be seen as a symptom of a deeper problem relating to the emotional and physical health of indigenous families and life.
4. There is a correlation between communities where there is little meaningful work undertaken by indigenous people and a heavy reliance on welfare payments and petrol sniffing amongst the youth and young adults. Again, it is clear that programmes which do not address the broader issues of indigenous dependence upon the welfare system will be piecemeal and will not succeed.
5. The most frustrating thing for Yirara staff, in their attempts to assist young sniffers, (and many have gone well outside their normal work to do so), has been the lack of mechanisms to ensure students come back to school term after term. Boarding schools such as Yirara are very effective in diverting sniffers, but students need to stay at school the same length of time as non-indigenous students. For this to happen governments must bring in more effective measures to ensure aboriginal children go to school regularly. State and Territory governments are not enforcing school and the Federal Government needs to hold back some Centrelink entitlements for families who do not ensure their children go to school. There is no other way of getting indigenous students to come to school. (Many other incentives and schemes have been tried but with very limited results compared to the outputs).
6. Police need to be given more powers to ensure young people at risk can be directed both to the care of FACS (Family and Community Services) and 'forced' to attend school. The limitation of police powers in this respect has also restricted the good work that could be achieved through a variety of diversionary means.
7. Many diversionary initiatives in the community fail because:
 - There is a high turnover of staff
 - Some services are duplicated and there is little talk between the different people and the different organisations they represent
 - The high level on indigenous mobility i.e. it is difficult to 'track' many young people who sniff petrol because they are always moving around between different communities and Alice Springs.

Non-sniffable Opal petrol

Our observation is that since the introduction of non-sniffable Opal fuel in some communities there has been a substantial drop in the level of sniffing in communities, although initially, there have been other

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problems such as young people breaking into houses (many of them non-indigenous houses) looking for supplies of sniffable fuel. However, to be really effective the whole of central Australia need to be 'blanketed' with Opal fuel, with no other unleaded fuel available. The relatively easy access into Alice Springs, and the fact that adults will bring sniffable petrol into communities (usually purchased at Alice Springs) mean that sniffing will continue to occur until people can only buy non-sniffable petrol in the whole of Central Australia.

Even if Opal fuel were introduced into the whole of Central Australia, it needs to be remembered that young sniffers may look for alternatives – paint, pain thinners, glue and the like, and the business community, police and public must be aware of and prepared for this.