

The Secretary,
Senate Community Affairs References Committee,
Parliament House,
Canberra. ACT.

Dear Sir,

I am responding to the call for submissions to the committee's inquiry into petrol sniffing in remote Aboriginal communities.

I was Superintendent of Ernabella Mission in the far north-west of South Australia from 1958 to 1972 and resided at Fregon (1973) and Amata (1976-80) communities as Minister of the Pitjantjatjara parish of the Presbyterian, and from 1977, the Uniting Church. In 1972-73 I spent one year as Superintendent of Mowanjum Mission in the north-west of Western Australia and oversaw the handover of Mowanjum mission to the local incorporated community. From 1981 until retirement in 1994 I lectured in Aboriginal Studies at the South Australian College of Advanced Education and the University of South Australia. I remain an Adjunct Senior Lecturer at the University. I interpret in courts and hospitals for the Interpreting and Translating Centre in Adelaide and in this role have contact with people who have been affected by petrol sniffing. I continue to visit the Pitjantjatjara region annually for various reasons. Experiences within the past month include interpreting for a youth from a community in the Northern Territory who had attempted suicide and having had a fire started at night, close to a unit at Amata where I was staying with family members, by a petrol bomb thrown by petrol sniffers. People living at Amata seem to accept that such occurrences are now a fact of life.

During my time at Ernabella, when despite limited funding, many of the people were employed in a variety of tasks such as shepherding, shearing, cattle mustering, well-sinking, fencing, building, brickmaking, gardening, maintenance, handcrafts, baking and butchering, young men were often employed on nearby cattle stations and school attendance was almost 100%, there was no consumption of alcohol, use of drugs or petrol sniffing apart from two isolated cases of alcohol use and the beginnings of petrol sniffing by a very few youths in the early 1970s. Now, with little meaningful employment for men in the region, the use and abuse of alcohol, drugs and petrol are causing immense and tragic problems. During our time at Amata in the late 1970s we observed the growing emergence of these problems.

Petrol sniffing was first observed in the region in 1968 when people returned from ceremonies at Warburton Mission in Western Australia and a few young men had brought back the practice with them. In the early 1970s a very few youths engaged in the practice at Ernabella. They ceased the practice soon after becoming initiated and a couple of these young men later became responsible leaders in their communities. As indicated above, by the time of our return to the

region to live at Amata in 1976 the practice had spread, although still restricted to youths and young men. The first deaths resulting from petrol sniffing occurred at about this time. Over the next decade or so, the practice increasingly spread to females and younger children and males continued to sniff petrol as they became men.

While living at Amata we observed early attempts by the Amata community in cooperation with YMCA to intervene by placing youth workers in the community. These attempts appeared to have limited effect. Children not affected by petrol sniffing joined in activities arranged by youth workers but the latter found it difficult to make contact with the offenders. Reports I receive from people now living in the Pitjantjatjara lands suggest that this is still the case, with limited participation by petrol sniffers in diversionary programs. We also observed the attempt by a Pitjantjatjara family to provide a program at Angatja community, west of Amata, in the late 1970s an early 1980s. This program failed because it was impossible to keep the children there. This indicates that strong legal sanctions and support are required.

I am enclosing as an attachment, an unpublished paper I wrote in 2001 in response to an article by Paul Toohey in The Weekend Australian Magazine. This paper provides more detailed historical background to the issue as related to Pitjantjatjara communities. I draw attention to the sections which deal with the underlying problems of hopelessness arising from the contemporary malaise in remote communities with the lack of meaningful employment, and the reasons why families find it difficult to take action to remedy the situation.

While diversionary programs may produce some temporary results, there will be no lasting solution to the problems until these basic problems are redressed and the people themselves can be persuaded to take responsibility and engage in a united attack on the problem. This must be supported by strong police and community action to stop the illegal supply of alcohol, drugs and petrol on the lands.

Yours Faithfully,

W.H. (Bill) Edwards.