

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

Closing date 4 November 2005.

RE: Senate Inquiry on Petrol Sniffing by Community Affairs References Committee

This submission presents the social ethos underlying the need for non-sniffable Opal petrol with respect to petrol sniffing in Indigenous communities and offers alternative solutions.

'Worry Business'

The first recorded incidence of Aboriginal people sniffing petrol was recorded after US soldiers introduced the practice in Darwin in 1951, in an apparent effort to keep Aboriginal babies quiet, a trend which continued after the war to aid sleep. (Brady 1995c3). Doubtless, they were never told of the dangers, or risk of harm, as evidenced by the recent outcry from Cape York communities that the Government failed in its duty of care by not providing community education, informing Aboriginal people of the risks to women drinking alcohol during pregnancy that their babies would be born with foetal alcohol syndrome.

Petrol sniffing is a cheap high and a substitute for alcohol in poverty stricken areas where alcohol restrictions exist and where many Aboriginal people are born with foetal alcohol syndrome. An addiction can develop for any chemical introduced into the body that causes the brain to dump stores of neurochemicals (the buzz). The replacement of those neurochemicals cannot be matched by the brains internal production capacity (the pain of withdrawal) and must be introduced from outside the body (craving). The body adapts to the level introduced to function normally (tolerance) and reach a high requires increased frequency and quantity. This chemical interaction and dependence is frequently misinterpreted as a sign of being weak willed or lacking fortitude, when in fact all dependencies have a biological basis it is the social environment that determines the drug of choice.

Petrol is derived from crude oil found underground. Wherever there is a petrochemical company there are polluting emissions and as a consequence people can develop dependencies without intentionally ingesting or inhaling. Poor health can result from consuming food grown in contaminated soil in industrial areas. Research on the correlation between the prevalence of petrol sniffing and the location of petrochemical industries and exposure to polluting emissions needs to be studied in Australia.

Petrol is also comprised of volatile hydrocarbons (aromatics) and Tetraethyl (lead) is commonly added to petrol during processing. It is the hydrocarbon aromatics that are removed in OPAL petrol in the hope that people will not be able to inhale it, what are the effects of absorbing it through the skin? Petrol sniffers either hold a saturated cloth over their nose and mouth or have a tin tied around their neck and inhale directly from a small container. Hydrocarbons are in propellants aerosols, paint thinner, cleaning and lighter fluids, glass chiller, dust removers, plant shine, even in whipped cream, which also contains nitrous oxide.

Particularly in the light of recent studies by Professor John Bertram, Head of Anatomy and Cell Biology who discovered that Aboriginal people have 250,000 fewer nephrons in their kidneys, to filter toxins, than non Indigenous people. International studies of Indigenous populations link lower levels of nephrons to hypertension and poor living circumstances.¹

¹ Professor John Bertram September 2005 contact details 61 3 9905 2751 <http://monash.golden-key.org>

Ethical Cultural Considerations

Colonisation occurred to house prisoners from Britain for which there was also no escape for Aboriginal people, who had committed no crime but were kept in detention centres, called missions. Since that time Aboriginal people have been relentlessly persecuted, victimised, and degraded in every possible way, stripped of all dignity, reduced to living like animals, literally legally recognised as minors, until Mabo 1992.

In a genetic sense, petrol and alcohol are recent introductions for which Aboriginal people have not had time to develop a metabolic resistance, and exposing Aboriginal communities to toxic substances is a genocidal activity. Sorry isn't that hard to say, unless of course you actually not sorry, which has genocidal connotations, forget the excuse of compensation, by implication not respecting the need for an apology reflects genocidal intention. To forgive means to give as before the event, to restore, but to be forgiven, one must first seek forgiveness, and to reconcile is to put right.

What will the Government do to put right the ongoing impact of colonisation and the over inflated sense of entitlement, of successive Governments and agents, over Aboriginal people. How will they address the underlying causes of poor health, crime and violence amongst Aboriginal people? Particularly substance abuse and those that are the result of the loss of land, cultural identity; and the effects of generations of families incarcerated in institutions.

While Aboriginal people continue to despair their existence, marginalised in a society they have been forced to assimilate, they will continue to be products of that society and rely on its substances, albeit, as a poor coping mechanism in an attempt to mask the pain resulting from the hopelessness and cultural psychic shock. When will the Government commit funds to addressing the real cause? Every Aboriginal person knows the status, and authority of non Indigenous people in Australia derives from power and money generated from Aboriginal land, and the collateral benefits arising from the illegitimate colony founded on a legal fiction.

The Government needs to make a real effort, not talk, or massage words on paper that weigh heavily on the hearts of those who know the rhetoric. Not by finding ways to spend money on bureaucracy, or their capacity to respond. A genuine effort needs to be made to reverse the effects of past policies that prohibited the practice of culture, the sharing and caring with family.

There is considerable cultural, social and linguistic diversity amongst ceremonies, social life, and have different mythologies and religious beliefs, and they need to be supported in passing knowledge onto their younger people. Assist Indigenous older people to share in their stories, through programs that support cultural revitalisation and give Aboriginal people a purpose for their energy to move toward the survival of their culture, as determined by themselves, in their own way, when the time is right for them.

Even if OPAL petrol is effective in curbing the use of petrol as an inhalant, there is an endless list of toxic Western products that can be substituted for non sniffable petrol. The problem areas are remote and often rely on air transport which cannot use non sniffable petrol, so other petrol will be available, undermining the effectiveness of OPAL petrol. All the while the underlying reasons remain unaddressed and the behaviour can simply switch to another product.

Is the strategy to remove from Aboriginal communities every toxic substance that can be abused by humans? Clearly, there is a need to introduce strict Corporate Social Responsibility guidelines for companies in, on, or near Aboriginal communities if a sustainable solution is to be found. Simply removing products causes aggression and leaves the Government and private companies open to claims of discrimination, as they are personal prohibitions on a particular race of people living in particular communities, prohibitions that are not placed on all people, no matter where.

From a medical and ethical perspective it is inhumane to introduce a substance, alcohol is just one example, and allow people's lives to be destroyed through addictions to it, and then to withdraw that chemical without medical supports. Regular use of inhalants leads to tolerance and withdrawal symptoms include chills, headaches, abdominal pains, muscular cramps and hallucinations, what supports are going to accompany the withdrawal of petrol?

Substance abuse by petrol sniffing, and many other substances, is a slow suicide, withdrawing the substances for some will simply lead to a faster suicide. Suicide as defined is 'intentionally taking one's own life, dying not through natural causes, as identified by a coronial inquiry'. The death rate among the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was more than twice the death rate of the total population, in 2003, and 17% were caused by accident, assault and intentional self-harm, compared to 6% of total non Indigenous population.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples rates of suicide are between double and treble the rate for their non-indigenous counterparts. The stark disparity is a distinct phenomenon of contemporary Aboriginal life and their social and political contexts prior to colonisation there is no evidence of suicide in traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, no word in any Aboriginal Language for suicide.

It was the high number of deaths in custody that first drew attention to Aboriginal suicide rates and the negative influence of the justice system on relations, coupled with reliving the burdens of the past that weigh heavily on Aboriginal peoples spirits, These have had an extremely negative impact on Indigenous lives and as a result older Indigenous people suffer from post traumatic stress disorder, which can have an astounding effect on emotions, they are deeply concerned about the loss of traditional cultures, languages, and societies.

While the effects of colonisation on the Indigenous people in Australia are similar to those of other countries, the one glaring difference is the ongoing denial, refusal, or inability of the Government and non Indigenous Australians to acknowledge and deal with the impact that their existence has had on Aboriginal people. It consumes an enormous amount of energy for Aboriginal people to be part of that denial, and the cost is high for remaining damaged, for as long as the Government chooses not to take responsibility for the circumstances in which Aboriginal people find themselves, (like a child that develops a problem to rescue a parent too weak to change their own behaviour), Aboriginal people will continue to be the scapegoat for problems foisted upon them.

Indigenous people were imprisoned for fear of political dissent and survivors of Nazi political imprisonment and torture similarly describe being forced to stand by helplessly while witnessing atrocities committed against the people they love. The magnitude of that pain, can only be fully understood and felt by the present generation of Indigenous seniors and exists in memories of lives robbed of value, but this state of psychological shame is reversible.

Suicide can be a covertly aggressive act where it becomes extremely important to express in the most forceful manner at the risk of one's own survival to serve as a message of punitive aggression, self immolation. The breaking a person's spirit is evidenced when the victim loses the will to live, which is not the same thing as becoming suicidal, people in captivity live constantly with the fantasy of suicide, and occasional suicide attempts are not inconsistent with a general determination to survive.

Wanting to die under extreme circumstances can be a sign of resistance and an attempt to take back control over one's life, it can be an attempt to have the same power over oneself as the perpetrator or obstruction to selfhood. Suicidal thoughts and attempts are the point at which a person's self is still strong enough to resist, the most dangerous time for losing selfhood is when a person no longer tries to keep warm or eat and they make no effort to avoid punishment or being beaten, they are resigned to be at the mercy and will of their oppressors.²

² Timerman, Jacobo (1981) Prisoner Without a name, Cell Without a Number. New York: Knopf, First edition. ISBN # 0394514483

Other Supports Needed

Indigenous seniors are survivors of these extreme situations and they need to be supported when they make an active choice to be the voice of their ancestors. The present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people have been debased for their entire lives and the belief that life is worth living has been an act of faith, even the simplest survival for some took every ounce of energy to make it through the day, unscathed.

Aside from the increasing number of funerals for younger Indigenous people from petrol sniffing and substance abuse, there is a 32 year disparity between the age of death of Indigenous females at 54.1 years and non Indigenous females 86.7 years, and a 23 year disparity between Indigenous men at 52.1 years and non Indigenous men at 75.1 years.

There is cultural obligation on Indigenous seniors to contact family and friends to attend funerals and to keep in touch and lack of transport can make it difficult. There is a need for a Toll Free Sorry Business Line for Indigenous seniors to conduct their Sorry Business. Accompanying this need is dedicated Aboriginal funeral plots to be buried free on their own land.

Indigenous older people are lacking the services for Grief /Loss/Bereavement Counselling. Currently, there are limited relevant services, groups and agencies available to meet Indigenous older peoples needs to deal with Loss, death, injury/accidents, chronic illness, disabilities, culture, kinship, land, connectedness to land, language, stolen generation, traditions, ceremonies, rituals, Lore/Law, relationship breakdown, loss/lack of employment.

The only solution I have been able to find that replenishes grey matter destroyed through injury or damage is Learning to juggle because it leads to changes in the brain that can last up to three months, according to new research by Dr Bogdan Draganski at the [University of Regensburg](#) in Germany and his team showed that adults who learned to juggle increased the volume of grey matter in particular parts of the brain. This MRI research, was published in the journal *Nature*, and showed these were the parts that process and store information about how we perceive and anticipate moving objects.

The scientist used magnetic resonance imaging to scan the brains of people who taught themselves to juggle in three months. After three months, the jugglers had a 3% increase in the volume of grey matter in the mid-temporal part of the brain. But this increase was temporary. Three months after the jugglers stopped juggling the 3% increase in grey matter compared to levels at the start of the experiment had fallen to a 2% increase.

Other Australian researchers such as the director of Melbourne's [Brain Research Institute](#) Professor Graeme Jackson was impressed by the study and states that this could have implications for rehabilitating people with a brain injury. Further to this Dr Stephen Wood, from the psychiatry department at the [University of Melbourne](#), is studying changes in the brains of people with mental illness and was not surprised that the jugglers' brains changed, he was surprised at how large the volume changes were.

OPAL petrol removes one means of abuse from one type of fuel, an overdue response but as a society we need to get off the petrol addiction and develop sustainable forms of energy, like hydrogen power, solar, magnetic, and other forms of power. We don't need to wait until fossil fuels run dry to develop alternatives. Other solutions include holistic healing, self esteem raising activities, physical education involving juggling, and locally driven activities.

Sincerely yours
Robyn Lucienne
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