

'Mt Theo Story 1999 - Tribal Elders working with Petrol Sniffers' by Andrew Stojanovski



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Program Overview

The Mount Theo Petrol Sniffer Program has been operating since February 1994 and is Yuendumu's most successful current strategy for dealing with the problem of petrol sniffing. The program is the grass roots initiative of tribal elders with the support of the local school, Tanami Network and the local Community Government Council.

The Mount Theo Petrol Sniffer Program aims to remove young people who are at risk (such as chronic petrol sniffers and young offenders) from Yuendumu to a safe environment out bush where they are looked after by tribal elders. When they are ready these young people then move back to rejoin the Yuendumu Community. This program has been operating successfully over the last five years and has been working closely with the local Yuendumu Police and the Northern Territory Correctional Services Office in Alice Springs. Over the last three years we have had a number of young offenders who have been bonded by the courts to live at Mount Theo outstation and to take part in the rehabilitation program that is operating there. While the young people are living at the outstation their bodies are given the chance to detoxify and recover from petrol sniffing. The young people are also involved in gardening projects, C.D.E.P. and traditional activities such as artifact making and hunting. On occasions when funding is available Yuendumu Skillshare and the Local School have run courses based at Mount Theo that teach the young people new skills. When tribal elders have assessed that a young person has recovered from petrol sniffing and is unlikely to sniff petrol or cause trouble in Yuendumu, they then re-introduce that young person into the community.

The program has brought enormous benefits to the Yuendumu Community in terms of both the prevention of petrol sniffing and the rehabilitation of petrol sniffers. Before the program began operating in early 1994 Yuendumu Community was plagued with problems associated with petrol sniffing. There were gangs of petrol sniffers roaming the streets every night. They would often commit crimes and cause disturbances. School attendance was low as petrol sniffers would actively recruit students from the school to join them in sniffing petrol. The community tried many strategies to deal with these problems including banishment and public floggings of sniffers, night patrols and the introduction of Av.Gas as an alternative fuel to petrol. The most successful strategy proved to be having a petrol sniffer program running at Mount Theo and a pro active youth and recreation program running in Yuendumu. When the Mount Theo program has been operating the number of young people sniffing petrol has reduced dramatically. In 1994 we managed to reduce the numbers from seventy young people who were sniffing in February to six young people who were sniffing in April. By

taking the young people who sniff petrol away from Yuendumu to Mount Theo we not only allow their bodies to detoxify and recover from petrol inhalation, but we also prevent them from getting into trouble in Yuendumu and recruiting more young people to sniff with them. This is a very important aspect of the program which works to prevent a culture of petrol sniffing from becoming entrenched amongst the young people of Yuendumu.

Getting Started

Mt Theo Petrol Sniffer Program began in 1994 as a community response to the crisis of petrol sniffing that was threatening the Yuendumu Community. At that time Yuendumu Community was plagued with problems associated with petrol sniffing. There were gangs of petrol sniffers roaming the streets every night. There were over seventy young people sniffing petrol in Yuendumu at that time.

None of the strategies such as banishment and public floggings of sniffers, night patrols and the introduction of Av. Gas, as mentioned above seemed to have any long term effect at reducing petrol sniffing in the community. At many community meetings the idea of sending petrol sniffers to an outstation was suggested over and over again by Aboriginal people. In February 1994 we had a meeting to begin such a program. The minutes of that meeting are worth quoting here:

“Petrol sniffing...This time it is different...we've tried to stop it...it hasn't worked. So Yuendumu is facing a future where it's young people will be crazy, sick and poisoned...many will be dead before they are 30.

It's not a problem someone else will fix for us. Government people will not come and sit down here and help day after day.

It's not going to be fixed either if Yapa (Aborigines) look to Kardiya (non-Aboriginal People) to fix it, or if Kardiya just say it is family business for the Yapa.

We will only fix it if the community decides it is now our problem and that we must all work together to fix it **now!....**

...A possible solution is to set up a program at one of the Yuendumu outstations. Young people could be kept there away from petrol and looked after by senior people and members of their families. They are still in Walpiri country and the program can be supported from Yuendumu...

The working party will work every day to help until the problem is solved.”

Such was the resolve of that meeting that five years later we are still working every day.

Peggy and Barney Brown (a traditional owner for Mt Theo) were at that meeting. They had some young people in their family who were chronic petrol sniffers who they were keen to take out bush to get them off petrol. Peggy said that if she got support to live at Mt Theo she would look after any petrol sniffers from Yuendumu.

Mt Theo is in an ideal location to run a program like ours because it is geographically isolated being 50 kilometres from the nearest main road which means the kids do not run away. It also has a telephone which is essential for safety.

We started with no outside resources. The school put up \$5,000 for food for the project, and we borrowed vehicles from around the community to transport food and people from Yuendumu to Mt Theo. We operated like this up until 1997 when the Commonwealth and Territory Governments began to give us funding support. All the work was voluntary and when the food money ran out we would book up food at the community store and then run fund raising barbecues to pay off the debt. The Aboriginal people living at Mt Theo would use their own private cars and pension money to run activities for the kids and to buy extra food and clothing.

This is how we started, and starting with nothing has made us strong. We all do this work because we believe in it in our hearts. Johnny Miller, the senior traditional owner for Mt Theo has worked for five years without pay, yet he is a cornerstone of our whole operation.

In Summary:

- * The program is an Aboriginal initiated and owned idea - Aboriginal people are central to it's success.
- * The Program began as a community response as opposed to being a solution imposed from outside the community. Local people had identified the issues and recognised the importance of dealing with them.
- * The people involved in the program became involved because they were genuinely concerned. No one personally gained any money, resources or pay from the program. Because of this there were no hidden motives for being involved in the program and no jealousies over resources because we had none.

What Was Likely To Occur If We Did Not Try To Stop Petrol Sniffing:

An examination of the history of sniffing in Yuendumu and other Aboriginal communities indicates that if there is no effective community action to stop petrol sniffing in Yuendumu the following things are likely to happen.

1. Sniffing Escalates. The number of young people sniffing petrol is most likely to escalate to more than sixty or seventy. During periods in the last four years in Yuendumu when the community has taken no action to stop petrol sniffing the numbers of young people sniffing has been sixty and sometimes up to seventy.

2. Petrol Sniffing Culture Is Entrenched in the youth culture of the community. Research from other communities shows that when a large number of young people sniff petrol in a community for a long period of time, then petrol sniffing and associated anti social behaviour becomes entrenched in the culture of youth in that community. This is indicated by comments such as "The sniffers are holding the community to ransom". In such situations young people sniff so much petrol that they get poisoned and suffer long term brain damage. The clinic has to evacuate petrol sniffers to hospital on a regular basis. The teachers in the school are unable to teach their students properly due to constant disturbances from petrol sniffers. There is a lot of peer group pressure on most young people to sniff petrol. Young people who sniff petrol constantly design halters so that they can sniff non-stop while walking around the community. Attempts to stop petrol sniffing are met with violence from gangs of sniffers. People end up leaving bowls of petrol on the bonnets of their cars to prevent their cars from being damaged by sniffers stealing petrol.

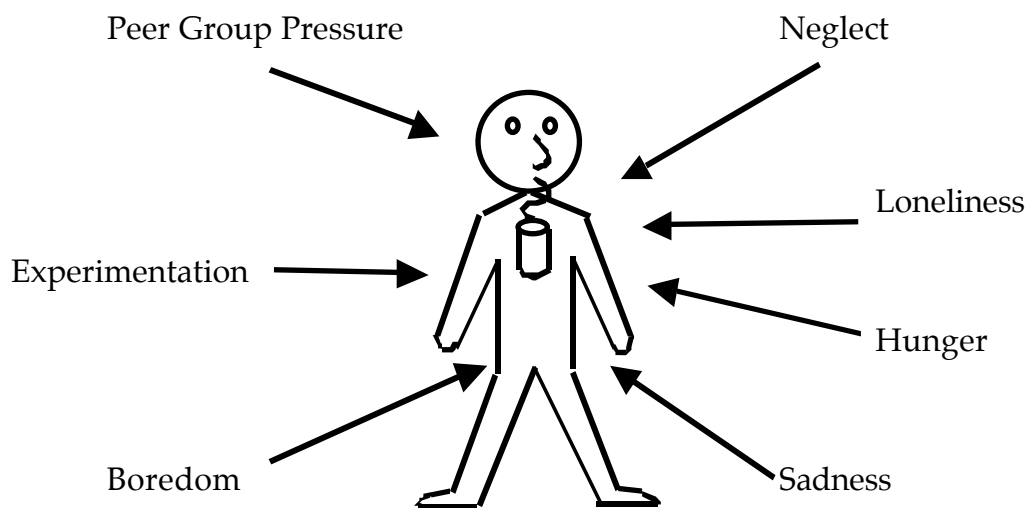
3. School Performance, Attendance And Education Suffers. Students are recruited by sniffers to go and sniff petrol with them. Many of these students will stop going to school and sniff petrol in the day time instead. Other students who sniff petrol but still attend school may be unable to study due to the physiological effects of petrol. In early 1994 we had many students in the senior girls class in Yuendumu falling asleep on the classroom floor hung over from petrol sniffing. For those students who do not sniff petrol their schooling may be interrupted by the visits of kids who are high on petrol dropping into classrooms, clowning around, and trying to recruit other students to sniff petrol with them. Research from South Australia gives evidence of this sort of behaviour severely disrupting classes, in some cases students and teachers are barricaded in the classroom while petrol sniffers pelt the windows and doors of the classroom with stones. (Folds 1987 pp 56 - 73)

- 4. More Health Problems Due To Sniffing.** It is well documented that in many Aboriginal communities where there is a high level of petrol sniffing that there are many health problems related to petrol inhalation such as birth deformities in babies, brain damage in the kids who sniff, fits, severe burns and numerous medical evacuations to hospitalise sniffers.
- 5. More Crime Involving Young People.** Most crime: car stealing, breaking and entering etc., involving young people in Yuendumu occurs when the young people have been sniffing petrol.
- 6. More Violence And Family Problems.** Petrol sniffing sometimes leads to violent behaviour in young people who are normally not violent, this can result in stabbings and murders. In recent months there have been two murders related to petrol sniffing in Central Australia. When I spoke to a petrol sniffer who witnessed one of the murders he described how the murderer was sniffing petrol at the time and was hallucinating when he killed the other boy.
- 7. More Young People Going To Prison.** Because young people are much more likely to commit a crime while they are sniffing petrol, more young people will end up going to prison as a result.

Why do kids sniff petrol in Yuendumu?

The two most commonly stated reasons (that the kids who sniff petrol immediately give) are because of boredom or because of peer group pressure. There are however many factors that affect an individuals decision to sniff petrol.

Pro Sniffing Forces



The kids who tend to be the most chronic sniffers are those kids who are often the abandoned children or the street kids of Yuendumu. Many of the kids living at Mt Theo fall into this category. These kids carry with them a lot of personal hurt and have significant members of their families and role models (often their parents) who live lives of chronic substance abuse.

How our program works

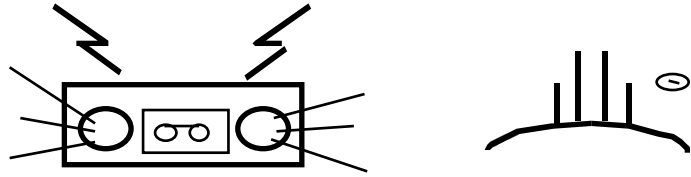
Our program is a two pronged strategy.

Firstly, we run a proactive youth program in Yuendumu to provide engaging activities for young people and to divert them from petrol sniffing. Before we began this program in 1993 on many nights there was little entertainment for young people in Yuendumu apart from petrol sniffing and the challenge of breaking into places. Young people roaming the streets sniffing petrol, would say they were sniffing because they were bored.

Secondly, we run the program out at Mt Theo. In doing this we identify the young people who are sniffing petrol in Yuendumu and then go and liaise with their families. If the families find it too hard to stop their young people from sniffing petrol we then take the young people to Mt Theo. Last year 18 young people stopped sniffing petrol following us having simply raised petrol sniffing as a concern with their families.

These two programs aim to address the most common reasons why kids sniff petrol in Yuendumu. The youth program aims to provide an alternative to sniffing. The outstation program aims to remove the most chronic petrol sniffing kids away from the community so they can have respite and also to prevent them from encouraging others to sniff petrol.

The Youth Program



The Youth Program aims to run activities every night of the week. Our current program has two nights of basketball, three nights of disco and two nights of movies with the youth centre open as a drop in place. Through running these activities we provide a vibrant alternative to petrol sniffing for young people. Our program operates in a manner that encourages the participation of "at risk youth" through providing activities in a non authoritarian youth cultured environment. This is important when engaging at risk youth, because if you do not provide an environment that they will feel comfortable in, they will not participate in activities. These young people have often dropped out of school and do not feel comfortable in a highly structured situation.

During the discos we have young people working as DJ's and cooking and selling food and drinks to raise funds for our program. The young people love working at the discos, and often we have up to thirty young people trying to volunteer for work. All the equipment in the youth centre was either bought using the funds the kids had raised themselves, or was made by the kids as part of a youth centre activity. Some of the things the kids have made have been pool tables and a juke box.

The youth program also runs after school and weekend activities, such as excursions and opening the youth centre and swimming pool.

The Mt Theo Program



The aim of this program is to stop kids from sniffing petrol. When cultural and environmental conditions permit this is how the program operates:

- 1) **Identification** of the most chronic petrol sniffers. This is done through night patrols of volunteers and staff, and also by consultation with the Police, the Women's Centre Night Patrol, families, the Council, the School, the Church and the Clinic.
- 2) **Consultation with the families** of the identified young people to discuss the issue of the young person's petrol sniffing behaviour, and to develop strategies to address this behaviour. This consultation may involve the Police, tribal elders and members of the Council, as well as program workers and volunteers.
- 3) **Agreement.** If it is agreed that the best course of action is to send the young person to Mount Theo then we transport the young person at the first opportunity to the outstation.
- 4) **Living at Mount Theo.** The young person lives at Mount Theo for a four week period, they dry out from petrol and take part in the program there.
- 5) **Visits.** After living at Mount Theo for four weeks (and not sniffing petrol), the young person is allowed to visit Yuendumu for two days and one night.
- 6) **Assessment.** The young person returns to Mount Theo, if they did not sniff petrol on their visit to Yuendumu they are allowed to visit Yuendumu for the next three weekends, on the condition that they do not sniff petrol. If the young person sniffs petrol they must again spend a four week period at Mount Theo to dry out before they are allowed to visit Yuendumu. If the young person refrains from sniffing petrol during these weekend visits to Yuendumu, and has satisfied tribal elders that they will no longer sniff petrol or cause trouble then they are allowed to return to Yuendumu.

Outcomes of the Mt Theo Program

Prevention of Petrol Sniffing in the Community

Taking the most chronic or "ring leader" petrol sniffers to Mount Theo prevents the entrenchment of a petrol sniffing culture among the young people of Yuendumu by stopping these leader petrol sniffers from encouraging other kids to sniff petrol. This can be illustrated by what happened in early 1997 when we had sixty kids who were sniffing petrol in Yuendumu. After running an active youth program and taking the fourteen most chronic sniffers to Mount Theo, we were then left with only two kids who were sniffing petrol in the community.

Respite For Individuals

Mount Theo provides the most chronic petrol sniffers from our community with respite from petrol sniffing. On an individual level this has a number of effects:

- 1) **It interrupts the kid's pattern of chronic sniffing**, and therefore lessens the amount of poisons from petrol that gets taken into the kids body. For example if over the period of a year a chronic petrol sniffer spends six months at Mount Theo, then that young person would have halved the amount of poisons taken into their system than if they had been left to sniff in Yuendumu. The amount of poison reduction is actually much greater than this, as I will explain later.
- 2) **Improved Health.** It provides the young person with an opportunity to get healthy again through:
 - (i). allowing their body to have a rest from a constant inhalation of hydrocarbons and lead;
 - (ii). ensuring the young person has an adequate and healthy diet, by providing that young person with three meals a day which they often do not get as a petrol sniffer in Yuendumu;
 - (iii). providing healthy and positive physical activities and exercise through bush walking, outdoor activities, hunting and gardening.

Crime Prevention and Keeping Kids Out of Prison.

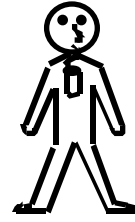
There is a high correlation between petrol sniffing and crime in Yuendumu. Most crime committed by young people occurs when they have been sniffing petrol. By staying at Mount Theo the young person is away from situations where they are likely to get into trouble. Taking these kids out bush where there is no petrol, means their behaviour is not affected by intoxication from petrol sniffing, and as a result the young people generally are no longer violent and do not commit crimes. This not only prevents crime in Yuendumu, but also means that young people are much less likely to end up in prison during their adolescence. If a young person is allowed to sniff petrol unchecked in Yuendumu it is highly likely that they will end up committing crime and therefore go to prison. The Mt Theo Program aims to prevent this.

Aboriginal Ownership, Healing and Cultural Maintenance.

Mount Theo Petrol Sniffer Program is an indigenous program as opposed to being a solution that is imposed by non-Aboriginal outsiders.

It has often been asserted by Aboriginal people that being out in country heals people on a spiritual level. This is one of the reasons behind the idea of sending kids out bush to recover from petrol. Mount Theo is regarded as a very sacred and spiritually powerful place. The whole program that goes on at Mount Theo is controlled and operated by senior Aboriginal people. They engage the young people in traditional activities there such as visiting sacred sites, gathering bush tucker, hunting, ecological land management practices and visits to old soakages. The old people at Mount Theo make artifacts and do traditional painting, one old man there is a *Ngaki* - traditional Aboriginal doctor. The old people pray for the young people to be healed from petrol and also give them lots of love. As Peggy says "I love all the petrol sniffers".

The role of non - Aboriginal people in this program is to support Yapa and respect Walpiri values.



Challenges - Self Autonomy: The right to sniff

An aspect of Aboriginal culture that is well documented by researchers such as Maggie Brady is the right to personal autonomy. This basically means that people have the right to do with their own bodies what they choose. It also means that people in the community are reluctant to impose their will on another individual. (Brady 1992 pp 72-75).

In terms of petrol sniffing this aspect of Aboriginal culture makes it hard for families to stop their teenage children from sniffing. This is especially the case with male teenagers who have been initiated and are considered to be "men". When discussing sniffing with families, parents will often say:

"That kid won't listen to us...he doesn't want to stop sniffing and we can't force him."

Non-Aboriginal people may find avenues to control their children's behaviour through sanctions such as grounding their kids or imposing curfews. However, such sanctions are so foreign to Aboriginal child rearing practices that they are considered inappropriate and unworkable in the context of most Aboriginal families.

The young people know that they have a right to self autonomy in their own culture. They know that their parents feel uncomfortable forcing them to do things against their will. When parents do try to force their child to stop sniffing or to go to Mt Theo, the child will often react in such a violent way that the parents will quickly back off.

Maggie Brady states:

Put simply, drugs enable individuals to exploit this finely balanced [social] system...sniffers of petrol...are able to transform notions of personal autonomy...to their own ends. At their disposal are communities of people who have been socialised into the belief ...that to remonstrate or dissuade them from drug use is to interfere with their right to do what they please with their own bodies.

...petrol sniffers exploit the 'loopholes' in what is, for the most part, a highly workable social system. (Brady 1992, p 74).

The violence and disruption to family life associated with petrol sniffing is of great concern to parents, however, they find themselves at a loss to be able to deal with it given the cultural right to self autonomy. Parents come up to

us and say:

“That kid was keeping us up all night sniffing petrol, running around with a knife and axe. Please take him to Mt Theo.”

When we go to the camp to collect the young person the parents will cajole the young person to get in the car and go to Mt Theo. However, if the young person is determined to sniff petrol they may refuse to get in the car. At this stage parents are at a loss, because it is culturally wrong for them to physically manhandle their teenage children to force them into the car. The kids know this and will stand their ground or simply walk away from the situation. Sometimes the child will pick up a weapon, such as a rock or iron bar. In exasperation the parents will say:

“That kid won't listen to us, get the police.”

Solutions - The Courts and the Police

Court bonds and police bail have been useful tools in dealing with the issue of petrol sniffing and the right to personal autonomy. Most young people who are chronic petrol sniffers usually end up in trouble with the law. Our program works cooperatively with the local police and the local court to ensure that the bond and bail conditions for petrol sniffers include clauses like:

“Not to sniff petrol, and to reside at Mt Theo or elsewhere at the direction of the Outstation Manager.”

These bonds and bail conditions enable the Police to assist program workers and parents in sending young petrol sniffers to Mt Theo. This assistance by the Police helps us to overcome the complexities associated with the young person's cultural right to personal autonomy. This is because the young people recognise that the Police have authority over them that their parents do not have.

These bonds and bails also reduce the level of confrontation associated with taking young people to Mt Theo. This is because the young people accept the authority of the bond and are often relieved to go to Mt Theo instead of gaol, which they see as the alternative.

The following clause in the conditions gives us the legal flexibility we need to rehabilitate rehabilitate the young people we work with:

“...reside at Mt Theo or elsewhere at the direction of the Outstation Manager.”

This means that before the bond or bail has expired we can re-introduce the young person to Yuendumu and observe their behaviour. If the young person sniffs petrol then we have the legal option of taking them back to Mt Theo. However if the young person has been rehabilitated and no longer sniffs petrol then they can remain living in Yuendumu while being monitored for any relapses.

The limitations of the bond and bail strategy are that not all the young people who sniff petrol have been caught committing crime. There are some young people who are chronic petrol sniffers, who actively recruit and encourage others to sniff, but whom we have no legal power over. The parents feel powerless to control these young people and the Police have no legal authority to stop these young people sniffing or to send them to Mt Theo. Occasionally with some older Police Officers we are able to get support through the use of intimidation. If the Police Officer is satisfied that the parents of the petrol sniffer want them to go to Mt Theo then the Police Officer will tell them that they have to go. The young person believing that

the Police Officer has the power to force them to go will then get in the car and go to Mt Theo. This is very helpful and is what the parents of the children expect the Police to do. It is what parents request when they say:

“That kid won't listen to us, get the police.”

Unfortunately this process of cooperation between the parents and the Police, (where the Police back up parental authority), is a grey area of the law. Some Police Officers try to cover themselves legally by requesting that parents sign forms stating that they want their child to go to Mt Theo. Other Police believe that the process is legally unclear, and are concerned about their own liability if an accident should occur after they have told a child to get in a car to go to Mt Theo.

Because of the legal uncertainty surrounding this issue, the level of Police assistance depends very much on the individual Police Officer on the day.

This would have to be the biggest gap in our program. What we would really like to be able to do is to nip petrol sniffing in the bud. That is as soon as a young person starts sniffing petrol, we would like to be able to stop it. If after talking with the young person's family they continued to sniff petrol then we would like to be able to legally force that young person to go to Mt Theo. This we believe would prevent the young person from developing a pattern of crime and violence that is so often associated with petrol sniffing. Currently, at the moment, unless we have a Police Officer who will intimidate the young person to go to Mt Theo we are powerless to stop some young people from sniffing.

There was one young man who began sniffing in 1997, and who had previously not been involved in crime and violence. His parents wanted to send him to Mt Theo but the young man refused to go. Instead he got deeper and deeper into petrol sniffing. He began to hallucinate and see devils. He started walking around at night with a knife and an axe, sniffing petrol and threatening people. He recruited other young people to sniff petrol. Twelve months later he was in prison, serving time for numerous assaults, including stabbing, punching a nurse, escaping from custody, and throwing petrol on a Police officer. If we had been able to take him to Mt Theo when he first began sniffing maybe he would never had started this trouble.

The Idea of a By-Law

The Yuendumu Community Government Council has been trying to get a by-law to make petrol sniffing illegal in our community. Such a by-law may help empower the Police to assist families in sending their petrol sniffing children to Mt Theo. As outlined above this would greatly assist our program and may mean that at some stage we may be able to stop petrol sniffing in the community all together.

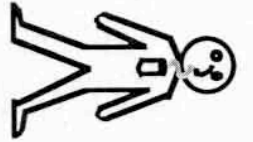
Unfortunately Yuendumu Council's application to the Northern Territory Government to get such a by-law approved was unsuccessful. In their response the Northern Territory Government indicated that they would not support such a by-law given the current climate of the decriminalisation of drug use. It is important to point out that petrol differs from most other drugs in that most crime associated with petrol sniffing occurs as a result of its psychological effects. There is little crime involved in obtaining and distributing petrol, as it is a cheap legal substance. There is little to suggest that making petrol sniffing illegal would result in the creation of a black market of petrol dealers, or in a change in the purity of petrol used. While concerns about the black market and drug purity are valid in considering the criminalisation of other drugs such as heroin, they have little relevance to the efforts of a small Aboriginal Community trying to stop it's children from sniffing petrol.

There is evidence from the Ngaanyatjarra Council in Western Australia that strong by-laws were very effective at stopping petrol sniffing. According to the Council, in November 1996 the W.A. government changed the penalties for sniffing petrol from a fine or prison term, to a fine only with no prison term. Within days of these changes there was a resurgence in sniffing and sniffing related problems in the Ngaanyatjarra communities. (Peter Rapkins, Ngaanyatjarra Council, personal communication, 1997).

Results

1998 was a very successful year for our program. At the time of writing this paper we have no petrol sniffing in the community at all. We can not claim that this is a permanent achievement as some of our clients have moved away from Yuendumu and it is uncertain whether when they return to the community they will start to sniff petrol here or not. What is certain is that if petrol sniffing does begin again in Yuendumu that the community has a strong strategy to deal with it. In 1998 our program dealt with 63 young people who had been sniffing petrol. By December 1998 seventy four percent of these young people had stopped sniffing petrol. On the following page is a table of our statistics:

1998 Mt Theo Program - Actual Outcomes



Total number of young people who sniffed in 1998:.....67



Maximum number of young people sniffing at any one time: 35



Young people who the program worked with: 63



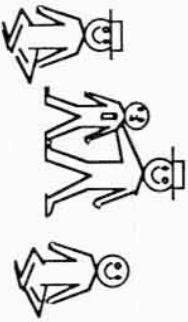
Young people who stayed at Mt Theo in 1998:.....45



Young people who stopped sniffing petrol after staying at Mt Theo:



.....29



Young people who had intervention from the program but didn't go to Mt Theo:.....18



Young people who subsequently stopped sniffing following such intervention:



.....18



Talking with families:



Total who stopped sniffing:47



= 5 Young People

Chronic Sniffers:

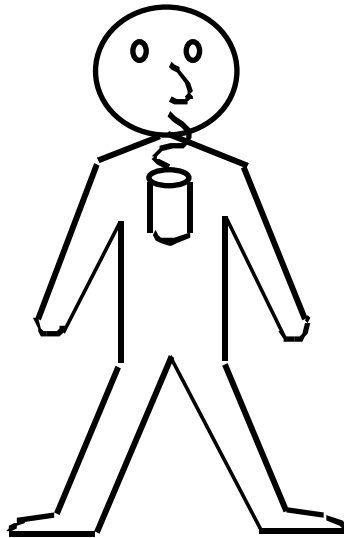
The kids who tend to be the most chronic sniffers are often the abandoned children or the street kids of Yuendumu. Stopping these kids from sniffing is really hard. This is because of the emotional damage these kids carry with them and because they do not have family that can stop them sniffing. These kids will sniff at every opportunity and some have been sniffing for years. It is probably only because we have consistently taken these kids away from petrol that they have not suffered any long term medical problems from sniffing. Mt Theo is the best alternative for these kids. It is a place where they can grow up free from the poisons of petrol and associated crime, in an environment of love based on traditional Aboriginal values.

Profile of Petrol Inhalation

Intake

Petrol Intake of a Sniffer

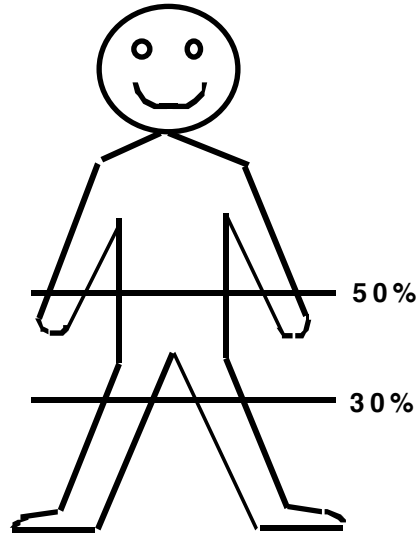
Left alone in Yuendumu with their sniffing going unchallenged and unchecked



Pattern of Petrol Sniffing:

A young person who is a chronic sniffer may be sniffing petrol for as long as 12 hours a day, seven days a week. Sometimes kids go to sleep with a can of petrol under their nose.

Involved in the Mt Theo program and the Youth program



Petrol inhalation reduced by over 70 %

Explanation:

- 1). For over 6 months of the year the young person is kept away from petrol. This means the amount of petrol the young person is able to sniff is reduced by over 50%.
- 2). During the months the young person is living in Yuendumu, because of proactive anti petrol work, the young person only sniffs at night and interrupts sniffing to take part in activities such as discos, football, swimming, basketball and billiards. So instead of sniffing for 12 hours a day the young person may only sniff four hours a day.

Combined the two points above mean an overall reduction in that young persons petrol intake of approximately 75 %

What holds the program together

Mt Theo is not a miracle program. Running youth activities and sending petrol sniffers to outstations are not original or cutting edge ideas. Yet somehow we find ourselves succeeding where we have been told so many have failed. We find ourselves being labelled with statements such as "Mt Theo is the model", or "Mt Theo is at the cutting edge of substance abuse programs for remote Aboriginal Communities".

People have come up to me and said "My department has been trying to set something like Mt Theo up for twenty years, how do you do it?"

I think a lot about why we have succeeded where others have not. In examining the pressure points and stresses involved in running this program I have been able to come up with some of the reasons behind our surprising success.

Factors that supported the program in it's beginnings:

- 1) Yuendumu as a community had confidence when it began the program as it had already dealt successfully with petrol sniffing in the past with the work of the Healthy Aboriginal Life Team. The people were confident about tackling the issue of petrol sniffing again.
- 2) Mt Theo was initiated by Aboriginal people whose own children were petrol sniffing. The people working on the program had a personal stake in it's success.
- 3) The Aboriginal people were given appropriate support from non-Aboriginal people.
- 4) The whole community backed the program to get it started.
- 5) The Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people involved in the program worked as a team of equals that supported Aboriginal control of the program and Aboriginal ways of doing things.
- 6) The results from the initial program came fast and were evident to the community.

Factors that have sustained the program over the last five years:

- 1) Limited resources - having limited resources: using second hand and private vehicles instead of flash new ones; having little or no wages and sustaining the program on a voluntary basis meant that there has been less jealousy and arguments and vested interests.

Other outstation programs that I have read about have often collapsed because of jealousy and infighting in communities over vehicles and other resources.

- 2) Little staff turnover. The people involved in the Mt Theo program both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal have remained the same since it's beginning. Because of this they have developed close supportive relationships with each other and a common vision about their work.
- 3) Recognition of Aboriginal culture and cross cultural relationships of mutual obligation. The Non-Aboriginal people involved in the program recognise and respect that Aboriginal people do things differently. They recognise that the Aboriginal people involved in the program make huge personal sacrifices to do the work that they do.

In working on the program Aboriginal people miss out on many of the normal aspects of contemporary Aboriginal social life, because they are living at an outstation non-stop. Examples of the things that our workers miss out on are:

- Freedom to travel when they feel like it
- Participation in sorry business
- Participation in ceremonies
- The extended family and social life of living in a settlement

The above are all aspects of social life that Aboriginal people living in Yuendumu value highly and take for granted as a normal part of life.

Most Aboriginal people in Yuendumu do not have jobs that require them to work seven days a week, being on duty 24 hours a day, whereas workers at Mt Theo carry this level of responsibility. A major factor that sustains the workers at Mt Theo is the love and support they get from people involved in the program.

It is essential for non-Aboriginal people to understand that when they engage in this kind of work with the children of Aboriginal families and tribal elders that they will be drawn into the kinship system of Walpiri culture. Peggy Brown states it as:

“We look after all the petrol sniffers, even though they're not our family. You have got to help us too, family way, sorry way, tucker way, dollar way.”

This means that as members of that kinship network non-Aboriginal people have cultural obligations to fulfil. By fulfilling these obligations non-Aboriginal staff help to maintain and nurture relationships of mutual duty and obligation that sustains the Aboriginal workers on the program.

Traditional Aboriginal people are not going to work for five years straight in such full on emotionally and culturally demanding work unless they are supported by genuine love and kinship from their co-workers. Examples of fulfilling obligations are:

- Letting co-workers use the phone to contact distant relatives to discuss ceremonial and sorry business;
- Giving co-workers food if they are hungry;
- Loaning co-workers money when they are hungry;
- Giving co-workers lifts or loaning them a car so that they can attend ceremonies and fulfil cultural obligations. For example, when someone's brother was sick we lent a worker a car to visit his brother in a neighbouring community.
- Picking up co-workers when they are stranded in town or out bush to get them back to work.

Many non-Aboriginal people reject these obligations as humbug. But in observing Walpiri culture I can see that these obligations are really important in sustaining relationships. I can only expect my Aboriginal co-workers to continue to feel obliged to work on the program if the program (or myself personally) assists them to catch up with aspects of their cultural life that they miss out on through their work at Mt Theo.

While people like getting paid wages, wages do not carry the same weight and meaning as personal relationships. Wages will not keep my co-workers working through the difficult times. Emotional support and relationships of mutual obligation do.

This perspective may appear complex to many non-Aboriginal people. But when working cross culturally we must try to bridge the gap between Aboriginal and mainstream culture, and be open to understanding things and operating from an Aboriginal cultural view point.

This is what I really believe sustains our program. It is the love and the relationships that we hold for each other as co-workers and for our clients - the petrol sniffers. This is a difficult thing for governments to grasp. A structure like our program is easy to model and reproduce, but the motivation, care and love that holds it together is difficult to duplicate.

My advice to people trying to set up similar projects is to sit down in a community for a long time, to build relationships, to never stop trying.

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