

## Senate Community Affairs References Committee

### Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing in Remote Aboriginal Communities

I offer these comments in the light of living and working with some Aboriginal communities of the Kimberley desert region spanning a period of more than thirty years. This region, often described as the Kutjungka region south of Halls Creek, includes the communities of Wirrimanu (Balgo), Mulan (Lake Gregory) and Kururrungku (Billiluna). My comments also arise from within my recently completed PhD in the same region relating to men's health.

My thesis, '*Kanyirninpa*: health, masculinity and wellbeing of desert Aboriginal men' (2004), examined men's health within the cultural context of *kanyirninpa* (holding), a deeply important social value and process that links and protects key relationships within desert society. *Kanyirninpa* has been described as providing authority with nurturance, as well as constraining the extremes of autonomy and relatedness. When boys become men a particular male aspect of *kanyirninpa* is revealed. As part of my research I examined, in the light of *kanyirninpa*, the social phenomenon of petrol sniffing within this region.

My research disclosed a number of things, some of which may apply to young women's experience of petrol sniffing (whose numbers have increased in recent years).

a) Petrol sniffing behaviour is not the same in each region or community.

The Wirrimanu community has a long history of intermittent sniffing behaviour (over more than forty years), but Mulan and Kururrungku communities (both established in 1979) do not. Despite this long, episodic history of petrol sniffing, Wirrimanu has not produced long-term, chronic sniffers. In other words, petrol sniffers eventually put sniffing aside.

It would seem important, in analysing and understanding petrol sniffing behaviour, that it be understood within particular historical and social contexts. We need to better understand why some communities have chronic sniffers and some do not, why some young people take it up and some don't, how some sniff by themselves and others sniff with others, why some communities in the same geographical region have experienced sniffing and others don't. We also need to know what leads people to give it up.

b) While petrol sniffing is obviously high-risk behaviour, it can perform an important social function for young people.

Apart from its pleasurable aspects (an important ingredient noted more recently in drug research), petrol sniffing can support an important stage of transition for some young people. I do not suggest that petrol sniffing is a rite of adult initiation (such a rite already exists for desert youth) but it can accompany a pathway into young adulthood. As young Aboriginal desert men face the prospect of initiation ceremonies and accompanying adult responsibilities, petrol sniffing enables them to prepare for and explore an important physical and social shift. (I note here the Kukatja word for body, *yarnangu*, can also be used to describe an adult person. The process of becoming an adult, *yarnangurriwa*, entails becoming both a physical and social person). As a young person matures, that person needs to explore their physicality with their autonomy, itself an important cultural value, over and often against those values that keep them connected to family relationships).

This is not to say that all young men need, or seek the risks and explorations that petrol sniffing offers. What can be important for a young man is to discover a social space where he can explore, with some risk and safety, the manner of his maturing.

c) Where sniffing occurs, not all young people sniff.

In this region there are some families where there has been no history of petrol sniffing, as there are also communities such as Mulan and Kururrungku, where relatively little sniffing has occurred. In these communities, a young person who wanted to sniff petrol needed to go to Wirrimanu to sniff with others, or travel outside the region.

What this suggests is that petrol sniffing forms part of a socially constructed pattern of behaviour. At Wirrimanu, people remember older relations who once sniffed and who do not appear to have suffered any harm as a result. Young people are influenced by the pattern of behaviour set by older brothers and male relations (as also with prison, sport and drinking alcohol). They are also more likely to seek the support of peers when there is a lack of family cohesion, if support networks within the family are fragile, and if the father is absent.

Young people make decisions about sniffing in the context of what significant others have done in the past, what is available to them in the present, and what they are seeking as they explore pathways to becoming adult.

d) It is possible to draw young people away from petrol sniffing.

The social value or experience of *kanyirninpa* does not, I believe, draw young men into petrol sniffing with others. However, the offer and relationship expressed in *kanyirninpa* can draw young men away from it.

As young desert men grow into adulthood they become more aware of the importance of male company. This gendered sociality, most clearly evident today in initiation ceremonies and sport, places young men in the company of older men. This, for most men, is a highly valued social space because it offers the support, friendship, protection and authority of older men. It is where important male relationships are strengthened and nurtured.

If older men invite young men to join their company, most will respond. Petrol sniffers may suspend their activities for ceremonies, sport and funerals. They may also put petrol sniffing aside if a more lasting company of older men is offered. This can influence some young men to make the transition from sniffing petrol to drinking alcohol. What is disclosed is the importance of providing an adult and male social space.

e) *Kanyirninpa* can support an alternative pathway for young people.

What is evident in this region is a particular and complex history of petrol sniffing. People's memory and lived experience suggests that petrol sniffing can offer young people a pathway for exploring important physical and social meanings. It is a pathway that people generally leave, as they become older. This is not to minimise the dangers of this high-risk behaviour, but to suggest the importance of understanding its social context and those social triggers that lead to the cycles of sniffing. It is also to argue for strengthening social and cultural values, such as *kanyirninpa*, and supporting alternative pathways for young Aboriginal people as they move into the demands and responsibilities associated with adulthood.

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