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Inquiry into petrol sniffing and substance abuse in central Australia

Thank you for the invitation to provide a written submission to your Inquiry.

As you may remember I provided a submission to the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, *Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing in Remote Aboriginal Communities*, in April 2006. In that submission I made the following points, based on my doctoral research that had been completed at the end of 2004 within the Kutjungka region of the south-east Kimberley (WA) and which included a focus on petrol sniffing. In summary: a) petrol sniffing is not the same in each region or community; b) while petrol sniffing is obviously high-risk behaviour, it can perform an important social function for young people; c) where sniffing occurs, not all young people sniff; d) it is possible to draw young people away from petrol sniffing and e) *Kanyirninpa* [a cultural value, translated as ‘holding’] can support an alternative pathway for young people.

Since that time that research has been published in the book: *Holding Men: Kanyirninpa and the health of Aboriginal men* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2008). Chapter Five explores the social context of petrol sniffing and is titled: ‘Petrol Sniffing: More than a risk’.

That published work, and recent discussions with community members and agency staff in the Wirrimanu (Balgo) community, help shape the following preliminary comments and those in relation to your five points and the eight-point plan.

Firstly, petrol sniffing behaviour by young people needs to be understood within the particular social context in which it is found. While this may seem fairly obvious, research has shown that we need to give more serious attention to the particular history of sniffing within a place, the social and/or individual triggers that initiate sniffing, and those behaviours that young people choose when they decide to stop sniffing. These contexts offer important lessons that can work to limit petrol sniffing behaviour by young people within specific communities and geographical locations.

Secondly, the social pathways that Aboriginal young people take, particularly those involving high risk, need to be understood within their experience of wider family and intergenerational relationships and the current fragility that many experience of such relationships. Attention to the nature and quality of these relationships is critical if

young people are to be drawn away from petrol sniffing and similar high-risk behaviour. Programs for young people need to consider the support and resources that young people within remote communities need if they are to engage social and personal pathways that are more healthy and hopeful.

Thirdly, when seeking to address the needs of young people in remote Aboriginal communities it is important to note that younger people form a much larger group than those who are older. Within the Kutjungka desert region, for example, those younger than 15 years of age comprise around 40% of the population whereas those older than 45 comprise only 14%. In other words, and unlike most non-Aboriginal communities, the percentage of young people is much larger than that of older people and will be so for many years. This age imbalance causes considerable issues and stresses related to the proper and ongoing care of younger people. This becomes an even more critical issue when that relatively small group of older people are not well, are absent from their communities, are in hospital or in prison.

In a society that places strong emphases on the value of intergenerational and interpersonal relationships and responsibilities, the needs and future of young people cannot be simply removed from the numbers and capacity of their older relations and carers. Without attention to both groups, older as well as younger people, critical issues affecting the health and wellbeing of young people will never be given proper or adequate attention.

In relation to the five points you raise:

(a) The ongoing effectiveness of the eight-point plan in combating petrol sniffing in central Australia.

Within the Kutjungka region of Western Australia the pattern of sniffing behaviour over recent decades has been intermittent, with periods of high sniffing behaviour followed by periods of no sniffing and largely restricted to one community, Balgo. While there was petrol sniffing by some young people in the Balgo community early in 2008 this has now ceased. Hence, the region repeated a previous pattern, but in smaller numbers than was experienced some years ago. It remains too early to see if this pattern will be repeated.

What is important to note is how sniffing in this region re-occurred. There was the influx of sniffable fuel into the Balgo community and some sniffers, who had sniffed in the past, sought to take it up again. Their behaviour encouraged other young people to take up sniffing, including young women. However, as in the past, sniffing was restricted to only one of the three communities, Balgo.

The restriction of access to sniffable fuel has been an important factor to limit sniffing within this region. At the same time, the memory of past sniffing and a historical cycle of intermittent sniffing suggest that young people may in the future return to sniff petrol or will seek access to other forms of inhalants.

(b) The extent of the roll out of *Opal* fuel.

The roll out of *Opal* fuel has made a significant difference in its ability to limit access by young people to sniffable fuel. Most sniffers are young and with limited access to

income as also vehicles. They remain dependent on what they can access within their own communities. However, while the roll out would seem to have influenced a reduction in sniffing, it remains seriously compromised when sources of sniffable fuel remain accessible to the Kutjunga desert communities, and where local people and visitors to the region visit, viz. the Rabbit Flat Roadhouse on the Tanami Road and the Shell Roadhouse in Halls Creek.

(c) The delivery of youth services in affected areas.

In the past few years the Kutjunga region has taken significant initiatives to improve the delivery and capacity of youth services to the young people of the region. However, such services are limited in both personnel and resources. The Balgo youth centre (formerly the old Mission girls' dormitory) can no longer be used; it is more than 40 years old and needs to be replaced.

A further issue, as with all agencies within the region, lies in their resources and capabilities to take a 'whole of family' and 'whole of community' approach to petrol sniffing that would enable some of the underlying causes of petrol sniffing to be addressed. As with earlier comments it would seem difficult, if not impossible, to address petrol sniffing behaviour by young people if wider family and community needs are not also addressed.

(d) The effectiveness and adequacy of resources provided to address petrol sniffing and substance abuse in central Australia.

Attention to young people as they move into that critical 'growing up' period of early adolescence remains a challenge. Many of the parents of the young people most at risk for this, and other forms of risk behaviour, were brought up in the Balgo Mission dormitories and hence were not offered a close and nurturing family life for much of their younger years. The constant challenges of modernity add to the pressures on adults to address a wide range of social issues affecting their own upbringing as well as that affecting their children and grandchildren.

Hence, apart from the roll out itself, it remains difficult to see that key elements of the eight-point plan have been given priority within this region. While there remains strong support from the Police, the Youth Workers and the *Palyalatju Maparnpa* Health Committee and others within the Balgo community to reduce petrol sniffing, key elements within the plan, for example, 'alternative activities for young people' and 'strengthening and supporting communities' do not seem to have received similar priority or support.

(e) What more needs to be done to effectively address petrol sniffing.

While serious in its effects on the physical and social health of young people and their families, petrol sniffing remains only as a visible sign of more serious, underlying issues affecting a number of young Aboriginal people today. Those young people, most at risk for self-harm and high risk behaviour, are often disengaged from their parents and wider family networks. As they, often at an earlier age than non-Aboriginal young people, seek to move outside the care of their biological parents and assume greater autonomy of their lives they can find themselves alone, frustrated and

angry. Without the wider and supporting company of older people, younger people will seek further company with their peers, many of whom share similar family experiences.

Programs that seek to attend to this group of vulnerable young people run two major risks: by focusing attention on those expressing ‘deviant’ behaviour they can reinforce such behaviour; they can also be seen to favouring such people and their behaviour over those who do not sniff but who also share important social and emotional needs. As a result, the resources that youth workers bring to these young people are very important and significant at this time. As they attend to the personal needs of young people, they offer opportunities for younger and older people to engage one another. They help identify personal and social pathways where young people can make healthy choices while feeling supported and protected by those family members who mean most to them.

Conclusion:

The reduction in petrol sniffing behaviour within the Kutjungka region would seem to have been positively influenced by the introduction of *Opal* fuel. However, this has not totally removed all sniffing behaviour for two reasons: the pattern on sniffing within this region over several decades has been intermittent and opportunistic. It falls and then rises, often when certain triggers operate, such as when sniffable fuel is available and there are young people who remember sniffing from previous times. The lack of *Opal* fuel in neighbouring fuel outlets, such as in Halls Creek and Rabbit Flat, compromises the effectiveness of the *Opal* roll out.

However, without greater attention to the needs of young people in remote communities an even more serious compromising of the roll out will occur. *Opal* fuel remains only part of a much wider and more comprehensive need to attend to the multiple needs of young people. The lack of facilities and resources for young people adds to this. This becomes an even more urgent challenge when it is clear that there remains a much larger group of younger people within communities than older ones. Those that care for younger people need more support and resources than are currently being offered. In many ways the eight-point plan in this region has been largely confined to the roll out of *Opal* fuel.

Developing a ‘whole of family’ and ‘whole of community’ approach to this issue remains a challenge for agencies and governments. Remote communities continue to remain poorly resourced for skilled personnel and physical infrastructure to be able to keep young people happily and creatively occupied after school, on weekends or on holidays. They remain even less resourced to work with families and across generations to develop and sustain healthy pathways for young people into the future.

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