

# **Petrol Sniffing On Cape York Peninsula An Intervention Strategy**

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## **Introduction**

Most Indigenous communities on Cape York Peninsula have identified petrol sniffing as a disturbing recurring problem. Aurukun, Napranum, Kowanyama and Lockhart River have all reported small or large groups of young people engaging in this behaviour at various times. I am also aware of petrol sniffing occurring in the northern Cape York Peninsula communities of Injinoo, Umagico, Bamaga and New Mapoon.

Wide-spread petrol sniffing can be brought under control, and indeed it must be brought under control because it frustrates solutions and compounds numerous other problems facing remote Aboriginal communities.

This paper describes a petrol sniffing control strategy used by the 'Boys from the Bush' program. It has two steps:

- Step 1            Removal of those most influential in introducing and maintaining petrol sniffing in the community and placing them with chosen carers in different communities.
  
- Step 2            Providing positive all-inclusive community and regional developmental programs for young people.

This control strategy was developed by the author who has worked for many years with young petrol sniffers. It was first applied in Mossman between 1999 and 2000 and again in Aurukun between 2001 and 2002. On both occasions, the State Police, Community Justice Groups and local youth workers confirmed that this strategy stopped all visible incidences of petrol sniffing and also stopped some young people abusing alcohol (BFTB Evaluation Report, 2003).

This paper expresses the views and experiences that have shaped the development of the strategy, including the beliefs about the primary causes of petrol sniffing and the transmission process. It also discusses the authority used to place the most influential sniffers with alternative carers in a different community.

My conclusions challenge the views of some researchers who question the efficacy of removing ringleaders from petrol sniffing groups, and also question the issue of punishment. Some of these researchers are theorising, rather than analysing from any personal experience.

The purpose of this paper is to share these views and experiences with other practitioners working in rural and remote Aboriginal communities racked by petrol sniffing. I want to encourage them to think through the intellectual confusion arising out of some recent opinions which have shown no success in controlling the problem.

## **Petrol sniffing scenario**

A typical petrol sniffing scenario on Cape York is where sniffing begins as an activity carried out in private by a small number of young people who are in their mid to late teens. These youths have been sniffing for some time and have in many cases recently returned home after a period of absence. For reasons that are not well understood the activity will then take off like a contagion, spreading quickly throughout the community and drawing in one young person after another. Later in this paper I discuss what motivates young people to sniff petrol.

The practice moves from private spaces to the public streets at night, progressing into derelict buildings and sheds during the day. Within a few weeks (sometimes within a few days) it can reach epidemic proportions, pulling in increasingly younger participants, both males and females. At this point it is highly visible to the general public. A few residents will complain to the police, council and welfare agencies about the sights and sounds of unruly mobs of sniffers congregating around certain areas of town, but they will be met with the usual response from the police and other agencies that “*its not an offence to sniff ... parents are responsible ... there is nothing we can do*”. As with drinking, there is a large section of the community which stands by and watches. Such people include parents, grandparents, elders and peers. Their influence is demonstrable by the sheer lack of it.

Before long, there will be an increase in the number and seriousness of the social, legal, educational and health problems. These problems have been discussed in my earlier paper titled: ‘*Petrol Sniffing on Cape York Peninsula*’ (James, 2002). If the situation continues to worsen, the usual semi-public meeting will be called which will be attended by mostly non-Indigenous council staff and departmental workers with only a small number of indigenous residents. At this meeting, standard forms of interventions will be discussed: Avgas, community education, and punishment. The most favoured solution to address this issue will usually be the removal of the sniffers to some remote outstation for a time. In the meantime, the state police will have apprehended most of the main sniffers for crimes they committed while under the influence of petrol fumes. Many of them will be sentenced to a youth detention or an adult correctional centre.

If the action of sending all the remaining sniffers to an outstation proceeds, the standard response of many young participants is resistance and preoccupation with escape plans. Stories are told about the incredible escapes of some brave (or foolhardy) sniffers. After a time, with these major sniffers gone, petrol sniffing regresses to a small number of young people periodically sniffing in a private manner, leaving the Indigenous and non-Indigenous adult community members not fully understanding what happened and why, but feeling relieved that petrol sniffing seems to have stopped. A few people do understand that the real reason the behaviour ‘stopped’ is because the main sniffers have been locked up. They also know that the cycle will most likely begin again once the chronic sniffers return from the outstations and detention centres.

This general scenario is presented to me again and again, with some variations. As a social worker my concern is not only with the petrol sniffing behaviour itself but also with the context in which it occurs. It is from an understanding of how the drug, person and environment interact that a deeper understanding can begin and more effective interventions developed. We need also to keep all factors in perspective and give consideration to them in relation to their significance. It is detrimental to the understanding and development of strategies to counter petrol sniffing when issues such as poverty, hunger, illness and dispossession of land are promoted as primary causes of petrol sniffing (Chivell [Coroner], 2002). In my experience these issues are relevant only in a few locations on a few occasions and are secondary issues.

### **Primary causes and transmission processes**

Clearly, the main reason why young people sniff petrol is because it can produce feelings of pleasure. Petrol fumes contain a number of chemicals which when inhaled affect the central nervous system in a way that alters mood, behaviour and state of consciousness (Chalmers, 1991; Brady, 1992; Goodheart and Dunn, 1994). Any drug capable of favourably altering a person's mood or state of consciousness is also capable of inducing psychological dependence – that is, a compulsion to continue using the drug for the purpose of achieving the same desired effect (Julien, 1992). If the behaviour entails some risk, this only adds to its attraction for many young people.

Irwin (1971) rates petrol sniffing as one of the most intrinsically hazardous forms of drug abuse. It can be more dangerous than tobacco, alcohol, amphetamines, barbiturates and heroin. 'Sudden sniffing death', a reaction that produces a response similar to a heart attack, can occur at any time, even at the first attempt at intoxication. The more common side-effects of inhaling petrol fumes include anorexia, insomnia, tremor, fatigue, headache, aggression, depression, body pains, difficulty in concentration, hyperactivity, impairment of memory and suicidal idealisation (Guest, 1999; Grandjean, cited in Brady, 1992). When suffering these side-effects, school performance and attendance deteriorates markedly. This type of substance abuse at a young age may also set a pattern for future abuse of other types of intoxicants (Cohen, 1977; Watson, 1977; O'Connor, 1986). In addition to these concerns, petrol sniffing has played a significant part in the offending behaviour of many young people. There are two aspects to petrol sniffing behaviour that may increase the likelihood of the young person penetrating deeper into the youth justice system. Firstly, children will often tamper with vehicles or break into storage areas in an effort to steal petrol. The temptation to steal the vehicle, its contents or other stored equipment then presents itself. Secondly, intoxicated young people often go looking for exciting escapades. They may also feel like lashing out. In these situations, the likelihood of the young person committing burglary, wilfully damage, or assault is greatly increased.

A second and obvious reason for young people sniffing petrol is because someone gave them the idea. How could they know that sniffing petrol can produce desirable effects, unless someone directly or indirectly tells them? I have found, for example, that few people know that the leaf of a tree named *Duboisa Hopwoodii* growing on Cape York is a powerful stimulant and hallucinogen, because nobody has told them.

## Some insight from research

Learning theory and social psychology can help explain how petrol sniffing is introduced and maintained at the individual, group and community level. It is not only the idea of sniffing, but the way in which the idea is conveyed, which is significant to its transmission. Ideas can be conveyed by word or by action, directly or indirectly, by an individual or group, by an adult or child. Indeed, peer pressure is considered to be the most common explanation given by sniffers for engaging in the behaviour (Brady 1992; Burns *et al* 1995; Carroll *et al* 1998). There are a number of useful paradigms or models that can assist in understanding of how individuals and groups, directly or indirectly, influence our behaviour.

For example, Swadi and Zeitlin (1988) examined the role of peer pressure in some detail. Their focus was on the development of friendships and how friends can influence the initiation and maintaining of drug-taking behaviour. Swadi and Zeitlin maintain that the most important factor in friendships is **similarity**; that is, friends will normally share similar habits, attitudes, social or personal characteristics. These similarities can develop through two processes: **selection** and **socialisation**.

### Selection and Socialisation

**Selection** is where one young person ‘selects’ another to become a friend because of certain similarities. In other words, the similarities exist prior to the formation of friendships. For example, they may be drawn to each other because they are related, or from the same region-of-origin, or play football, or sniff petrol. It may be that they are drawn to each other because of a particular social characteristic and it just so happens that they both sniff. Glenn (cited in Swadi and Zeitlin, 1988) found that children at risk all had low self-esteem, a feeling of not belonging, lacked interpersonal skills, communication skills and situational skills. Perhaps it is their psychological state and lack of social skills that draws these young sniffers to each other.

Sniffing can be a way of creating a particular image for oneself. A study of sniffers in Perth found that volatile substance users both had and wanted a more “*non-conforming reputation*” than non-sniffers (Houghton *et al*, 1998). This study also found that sniffer groups were able to provide members with a strong sense of identity. “*Adolescents are using specific substances, such as volatile solvents, as a means to attain an ideal reputation, one which allows them to both achieve and experience success* (Houghton *et al*, 1988, p.208).” The members of these groups may have low self-esteem, but within these groups, chronic sniffers have the highest status (Carroll *et al*, 1998).

Brady’s study (1992) also observed groups of sniffers wanting a non-conformist image. She states that, “[i]n many communities, the groups of sniffers take on a decidedly ‘*oppositional*’ style, in which they cultivate the differences between themselves and mainstream Aboriginal society. This attitude, along with the ambience of danger and excitement associated with sniffing, helps to explain why new recruits are inducted into the practice (Brady, 1992, p.88).”

**Socialisation**, on the other hand, is where similarities develop *after* association, as a result of interpersonal influences. This is a situation where the friendship was not established on the basis of common petrol sniffing behaviour; rather the behaviour was introduced by someone within an already formed friendship group. This is how petrol sniffing was introduced to a number of Cape York communities years ago; it is also how the sniffing of aerosol paints is presently (2004) being introduced to young people on Cape York by friends and family members from Cairns.

Swadi and Zeitlin (1988) found that both selection and socialization were important to the process of friendship formation. This means that there is a real likelihood a friendship will dissolve if a member does not conform to certain common behaviours.

### **Compliance, Identification and Internalisation**

Other social psychologists have developed different, but equally useful paradigms in which to describe the power and process of social influence. Worchel *et al*, (1991), for example, described three distinct types of submission response to the pressures of social influence - **compliance**, **identification** and **internalisation** – all applicable to the task of trying to understand the motivations of sniffers.

**Compliance** is when individuals simply go along with certain kinds of social influence but there is no great interest or commitment to the behaviour. For instance, a young person may participate in petrol sniffing as a result of peer pressure, but there is no real commitment to the behaviour. Once the peer pressure stops the behaviour will stop. A number of boys from different communities have told me how they were “forced to sniff” under the threat of being ‘bashed’, ‘put-down’ or simply excluded from the group. When these boys were released from that pressure, or on those occasions where they were able to release themselves, their sniffing immediately stopped.

This is illustrated in the following statement made to me by a young person from Mossman in relation to alcohol. *You can't stop the drinking here, it's too strong. If you want to stop others will force you into it. You can't say no, they will make you. If you don't drink with them they think bad of you. The only way to stop is to get out of this place.*

**Identification** is more complex. It occurs when individuals adopt the behaviour of a person or group that he or she likes and wants to establish or maintain a friendship with. However, when that relationship comes to an end, for whatever reason, the person will eventually lose interest in the behaviour.

Young people who fall into this category of identification are not dissimilar to the young people described by Brady (1992) particularly how the cessation of petrol sniffing can be tenuous, with some sniffers requiring only a small prompt to start them sniffing again.

*“Already previously introduced into the practicalities of use and having experienced the mood-altering effects, the user is re-activated (as it were) by identification with another (usually someone who re-enters the social arena of the community after a period of absence), and so takes up the practice once more (Brady, 1992, p.86).”*

Similarly, members of petrol sniffing groups have been regularly referred to the 'Boys from the Bush' program over a number of years. While they are in this group program, they refrain from sniffing and are generally well behaved. However, there has been at least one occasion when a well-known chronic sniffer and a perceived leader of a petrol sniffing group in their home community was referred to this program with the result that nearly all program participants re-engaged in petrol sniffing followed by a spree of offending behaviour.

**Internalisation** is when a young person's attitude, beliefs or aims coincide with the admired person or group. This person is more likely to maintain the behaviour even when the initial influencing pressure has been removed (Worchel *et al*, 1991).

The distinctions between compliance, identification and internalisation are important, as they enable us to predict how an individual is likely to respond to the presence of petrol sniffing. An individual who is simply complying with individual or group pressure has no great desire to sniff. It is my experience that the large majority of young people on Cape York are in this situation. As soon the peer pressure is removed we would expect the behaviour to cease. Whereas an individual who actually wishes to identify with sniffing or sniffers only need observe or hear about these in order for them to seek out the source.

The number of young people who readily identify with sniffing or sniffers varies greatly from community to community. In some communities like Aurukun there are a number of young people like this, whereas I am not aware of any in Laura, a community in the lower central area of Cape York. On the other hand, a young person who has internalised sniffing behaviour no longer needs a prompt. Such a person, for whatever reason, has developed into a sniffer who maintains and transmits the behaviour to others.

Clearly, individuals or small groups are responsible for (re)introducing petrol sniffing into communities. This was reported to be the case in Aurukun in November 1995 and February 1997 (Douglass, 1998). In 1997 a number of young people from Injinoo had told me how petrol sniffing was introduced into their community by a young person from Lockhart River. In 1999 a number of students at Wangetti Education Centre told me how the sniffing of Glade aerosols was introduced by some young girls from Cairns. In 2000 a number of young people from Mossman Gorge told me how sniffing of petrol and other substances was introduced by a group of young people from Woorabinda. In 2002 a number of young people from Aurukun told me that petrol sniffing was reintroduced by a young person who had returned from a lengthy period in detention. In 2003 a young person from Napranum told me how the sniffing of paint was introduced into the community by a young person from Cairns.

I have found often that those who (re)introduce sniffing tend to have a history of frequent and intensive sniffing of petrol, and possibly other substances. A number of them have no consistent or clearly defined care provider or guardian, nor association with good role models. They may be from another community or they may have returned home after a period of absence. They may feel lacking in admirable traits such as intelligence, aptitude or competence, or in status as the oldest or strongest. What they do have is the power to influence the behaviour of others and they appear to see this as a strength. These young people are possibly as much addicted to the

power and status that they can generate, as to the behaviour itself. Shaw (cited in Chivell [Coroner], 2002, para. 10.31) referred to the example of a young man at Warburton, *“who is charismatic and influential among the young people there, and said that every time he comes out of jail he encourages others to sniff petrol – there needs to be an option of getting those people away from the community, and that gives you a chance to break up the networks.”* In my own experience it has been individuals and small groups of young people who were responsible for introducing sniffing. Brady (1992) also noted how sniffing was introduced into a number of communities by young visitors.

Typically these influential chronic sniffers are also very difficult to engage. Shaw (2002, p.18) notes that, *“the peak ‘at risk’ group for sniffing – those between 15 and 19 years of age – are often difficult to engage in community activities.”* For them, organised sport and recreational activities are too restrained, dull and unexciting, whereas crimes, particularly car stealing, provide them with a preferred level of excitement – the bigger and more important the vehicle the better.

### **A strategy for petrol sniffing**

Having outlined the primary causes and types of process involved in the introduction and maintenance of petrol sniffing, I will now turn to the detail of the two step control strategy.

#### **Step 1: The removal of those with the most influence from the community and placing them with related carers in another community**

The 1985 Senate Select Committee on Volatile Substance Fumes concluded that the removal of ‘ringleaders’ is paramount to effective control of sniffing (Commonwealth of Australia, 1985). I prefer to replace the word ‘ringleaders’ with ‘the most influential’ because on occasions there is no clearly identifiable individual or group actively trying to socialize other young people into sniffing. However, on most occasions the most influential sniffers and the process used are clearly identifiable.

One of the methods used by the ‘Boys from the Bush’ program to assist in this assessment is the recruitment of particular young people whose job was to hang-out, so to speak, on the streets at night in order to gain information on the source and process of the influences. This is the first task in Step 1 of the strategy.

Once a source or sources of the sniffing have been identified, the second task is to decide on the best course of action. One of our actions has been the introduction of positive peer influences (Swadi and Zeitlin, 1988; Brady, 1992). This involves the recruitment of young charismatic non-sniffing Indigenous people to work and socialise with groups of sniffers to try and counteract the power of the most influential petrol sniffers.

Another strategy, which is the topic of this paper, is the removal of those clearly identifiable as the source, while remaining vigilant to other less identifiable sources. In the case of Aurukun in 2001 - 02, it proved unnecessary to remove all the sniffers from the community in order to bring the behaviour under control. It was necessary to remove only the most influential, who were easily identified. This showed that most sniffers were simply complying or identifying with the behaviour while few had

internalised it. Once the most influential sniffers are absent it makes the introduction of positive peer influences appear more effective. Their absence would also make it easier for other preventative strategies to take effect.

There is another possible explanation why the removal of the most influential chronic sniffers stopped all visible incidences of petrol sniffing. It is the deterrent effect it has on others. I have often suspected that some young people are more concerned about the prospect of *being held accountable for their actions* by having to attend school or work in an unfamiliar environment than they are by the prospect of being placed in detention, which is often along with other family members and friends. But sometimes this is clearly not the case, because a number of young people specifically requested to be placed out of the community rather than go to detention.

What happens to the young people who are removed? Prior to the implementation of this strategy, a number of the most influential were incarcerated for crimes they had committed while under the influence of petrol; others were sent to outstations. A number of young petrol sniffers mainly from Lockhart River and Kowanyama, were sent to Petford Training Farm (a residential property approximately 2 hours drive from Cairns that went out of operation in 2001).

The police and courts in effect assist with this strategy, at least on Cape York, by apprehending and sentencing young offenders to a period of detention, when this action is warranted. Some of these young offenders happen to be the most influential petrol sniffers. However, the justice system is not the most effective way of dealing with this behaviour. Some of its limitations include:

- \* The police and courts can be too slow to react. Unfortunately, not all consequences for reckless and anti-social behaviour are immediate. Potency of effective deterrent is dissipated by time. Whilst the culprits are operating on a 'here-and-now' level, the legal system dawdles over a process which can go on for over 12 months;
- \* Offenders are more likely to receive community-based orders, which are poorly supervised and rarely include the services of an actual treatment or rehabilitation program;
- \* Chronic sniffers who do not commit crimes or have not been charged with crimes avoid all formal attention because sniffing alone is not an offence.
- \* Detention as a strategy to control petrol sniffing appears to have little direct rehabilitative effect (Brady, 1992). It does, however, give petrol sniffers a break from sniffing and they are provided with regular meals, exercise and some education. It also provides the home community with a break from their influence and offending, particularly for those older and younger women who are so often victims of sniffing violence (Chivell [Coroner], 2002). These are important considerations and should not be looked over. It also provides community organisations with the opportunity to try and install some preventative strategies. This break from the most influential of chronic sniffers enables scarce resources normally consumed by the consequences of sniffing to be made available for the implementation of preventative strategies.

Outstations can be used for these same purposes. Outstations are a more popular option for most Community Justice Groups on Cape York and, according to Mosey (1997), one of the preferred options of most communities in central Australia. There are a number of purposes for sending petrol sniffers to outstations. These include:

- \* an alternative to detention;
- \* a means to enforce prohibition;
- \* a means of controlling movement;
- \* respite from sniffing for the benefit of the sniffer, family and community;
- \* to enable their involvement in more constructive activities;
- \* allowing community-based programs to take effect;
- \* a means of asserting power and authority over young people;
- \* the freedom to withdraw from non-Aboriginal influences and restore elements of the traditional lifestyle unconstrained by the proximity of outsiders.

Like a number of strategies, using outstations has had mixed success. Mt Theo Outstation in the Northern Territory is, by all accounts, operating a successful petrol sniffing program. The co-ordinator of the program, Stojanovski, explains the reasons for their success:

*“In my opinion, if we didn’t have an Outstation we would not have solved petrol sniffing in Yuendumu. The reason is that you need a deterrent, you need a consequence. Even if there were lots of different fun things to do in Yuendumu and lots of education and everyone could get a job if they really wanted to, it’s a hallucinogenic drug, its fun ... so because of that, having that Outstation has been really essential in removing the peer group pressure on kids to sniff petrol ... I think if we ran that Outstation and did not have those other things happening in Yuendumu it wouldn’t work, but I think that if we didn’t have that Outstation we would still have heaps of petrol sniffing (Chivell [Coroner], 2002 p.10.42).”*

One of the advantages of outstations is their remoteness or isolation from the main community, but this can also be a drawback.

If we accept that chronic sniffers are more likely to be poorly educated, hold no marketable work skills, persist in displaying irresponsible and socially disruptive behaviour, have an inability to form lasting relationships, suffer from low self-esteem, depression and suicidal thoughts, then these young people are indeed in need of considerable support and supervision. I am aware of at least three young people from different communities on Cape York who have committed suicide in the past three years, and all three were known chronic petrol sniffers.

Most outstations, like detention centres, are by nature limited in their ability to prepare young people for constructive participation in the wider world. We in Cape York Partnerships believe it is important to lay down the foundations for each and every child to fulfil their potential and to realise their talents. Our concern is that most outstations are deprived environments. They are not able to provide the necessary stimulation, knowledge and skills for successful participation in the wider world. They also run the risk of deepening antisocial tendencies and increase their dependence on an environment where the necessities of life are provided by others. So the outstation option may only help maintain the passive welfare dependency that Cape York Partnerships are working to change.

Rather than sending young people to outstations, Cape York Partnerships focus is on helping young people to participate in the wider society where there are real employment, educational and economic opportunities. “*We want them to embark on what we call ‘orbits’, where they see Coen or Aurukun or Lockhart River as their home base, and they ‘orbit’ to Cairns or Sydney in pursuit of education, employment, sporting and artistic careers* (Pearson, 2003, p.4)”.

In order to achieve this, it is important to change welfare programs for able-bodied people, including the young, to reciprocity programs. To this end, young people who need to be removed from their environment, for the protection of themselves and others, are best placed in environments where they are required to participate in real educational, training and work opportunities, and to pay for the care and supervision they receive from their host families. These host families are specially chosen Indigenous people with the following qualities.

- \* Family, ethnic or cultural links to the young person and/or his/her community.
- \* Approved by the community and child’s family
- \* Engaged in regular work.
- \* Able to provide effective support and supervision.
- \* Can ensure the young person receives education or employment.
- \* Good role models.

The details of this practice have been documented in my unpublished paper titled: ‘*The practice of placing serious young offenders in an alternative environment with new care providers*’ (2003) [www.boysfromthebush.org.au]. The problem of running away remains, but this can largely be overcome by distance and geography.

### **Issues between placing influential sniffers with host families and on outstations**

Two of the most prominent opponents to the practice of removing chronic sniffers from the community are d’Abbs and MacLean (2000). In summary they say; “*Petrol sniffing is a group activity rather than being behaviour that is led by specific individuals, and therefore removing apparent ‘ringleaders’ is not advised* (p.89)”. In my experience, this is an inaccurate and potentially harmful statement. Interventions based upon an inaccurate understanding of the behaviour will most likely be ineffective and may even worsen the situation. This may explain why so many petrol sniffing control strategies have failed.

Brady (1992) first questioned the notion that petrol sniffing groups had leaders. Her argument was based on the existence of a deep-seated objection by Aboriginal people to being ‘bossed’, and secondly, many sniffers had expressed to her their personal choice to experiment with, and then to abandon, sniffing. This argument has a number of weaknesses in that it was only certain forms of overt and direct control which were actively resisted by Aboriginals on Cape York, whose personal and political ideology tended not to recognise structural domination, such as that of Aboriginals by Europeans or women by men (Martin, 1993). Peer pressure on the other hand is a universal phenomenon, and as pointed out earlier, peer pressure is the most common explanation given by sniffers for engaging in the behaviour. Many sniffers may well have told Brady that they “chose” to sniff, as many sniffers have told me how they were “forced” to sniff, but these are extremities to various forms of social influence. The reality is that there are young people who are highly influential in introducing and maintaining the behaviour. On this point, Brady appears to agree: “*It is clear that the*

*presence of particular individuals does seem to influence the level of sniffing, at least in some communities ... (1992, p.130)."*

d'Abbs and MacLean (2000, p.70) go on to say that: *"Strategies involving banishment and/or other punishments run the risk of accentuating one of the key conditions associated with chronic sniffing: the social isolation of the sniffer – from their families, kin networks and the community. It is for this reason that a number of workers have preferred a variety of other strategies, all of which are designed to 'reintegrate' the sniffer with his/her family, kin and community (e.g. Dalton-Morgan 1978; Franks 1989), both by providing alternative recreational activities and through counselling or attendance at an outstation program."*

To say that banishment and other punishments risks accentuating the social isolation of sniffers which is a key condition of sniffing conveys a degree of intellectual confusion. For a start, if chronic sniffers are socially isolated it is more likely due to the effects of their sniffing behaviour rather than the cause. Secondly, it is an indisputable fact that punishment, particularly physical punishment, can stop individuals from sniffing petrol. This is confirmed in the following statement by one of Australia's most respected anthropologist:

*"I am reminded of the person who told me how they had excluded petrol sniffing from their community for a significant period (this was in the NT in the 1980s). They took the sniffer ringleaders out the back of the council offices and two employees from elsewhere (ie. they had no relatives locally) literally flogged the shit out of these boys. End of petrol sniffing – for quite a long while. This action probably saved several lives, not to mention considerable amounts of brain damage etc., house-breaking, terrorising of night nurses etc. that had been going on. Illegal, nothing to do with customary law, possibly internationally embarrassing – and apparently highly effective. That's the dilemma (Alcohol and Drugs Working Group, 2002, p.31)."*

The issue with physical punishment as a sole intervention strategy is that it will have only a limited effectiveness. It is not a desirable path and can have a number of psychologically damaging side-effects. It may act upon the most basic of instincts (fear) but it reduces the essential elements of rationality. Sowing the seeds of future discontent, it will eventually rebound in the guise of vengeance and reprisal where the victim is likely to become the perpetrator. This limited effectiveness and the risk of escalating violence are revealed in the following statement made to me by a young 18-year-old Aboriginal-Islander from Cairns. *"Joseph caught his younger cousin brother sniffing last month and really gave him a bashing, but I don't think he gave him enough because he started again."*

There are however non-physical forms of punishments, such as being sent to an outstation, against one's will, for a time. D'Abbs and MacLean's (2000) position does not appear to take account of the fact that most chronic sniffers do not want to attend outstation programs, so for them it is a punishment. It is therefore a contradiction to say that sniffers should not be punished and to also support their placement on outstation programs. The outstations on Cape York at which petrol sniffers are placed are either remote or cut off from the communities by natural barriers. According to Stojanovski (Chivell [Coroner], 2002), Mt Theo Outstation is 177 kilometres from Yuendumu. It was located at this distance to make it difficult for young people to

leave. The fact is that if chronic sniffers had a choice, they would choose to remain in their community. One of their complaints is that outstations are boring. For, despite the problems of their home community, most outstations provide even less stimulation (Martin, 1993, p.175). In my introductory scenario, I mentioned that the standard response of many young sniffers on Cape York sent to outstations is resistance and a preoccupation with escape plans. I note that Mosey (1997) has also concluded that “[o]utstations must be isolated to prevent people escaping and petrol coming in. Those located close to main roads or communities have not been effective.”

Running away is a common response of many young people coerced into adverse activities. Young people running away from cattle stations, work camps, boarding schools and residential programs occurs regularly. On one occasion it occurred with this strategy. Running away need not be a significant problem as the young person can simply be returned, keeping in mind that a period of curfew or a secured enclosure presents a challenge for which the reward is built in. The young person has defied a stricture; he has defeated an external foe; he has beaten a system. It is also worth distinguishing whether the young person is running ‘from’ or running ‘to’. It is apparent that many young people value not just their personal freedom but the licence to misbehave. Whilst the common plea of ‘homesickness’ holds some veracity, it belies a more significant factor. These young people savour the unrestricted, unconditional acceptance of them in their own communities and within their own families.

In regard to d’Abbs and MacLean’s claim that a number of workers prefer strategies “*designed to ‘reintegrate’ the sniffer with his/her family, kin and community, both by providing alternative recreational activities and through counselling ...*”, this sounds all well and good, but the reality on Cape York is that most families of chronic sniffers are dysfunctional and their kids have suffered a lifetime of considerable abuse and neglect. These children and young people are not in need of “reintegration”; they are in need of support and effective supervision. I have personally worked with a number of families of young sniffers who claim to love and care for their children, but their addiction to alcohol has caused them to abandon their responsibilities towards the children. Counselling, organised sports and recreational programs by themselves have been tried and proved ineffectual in stopping sniffing. A prominent feature here is the supposition that youth have enjoyed an ‘integrated’ existence from birth. For whatever reasons, the familiar infrastructure is often fraught with irregularities. We refer to this using the generic term ‘dysfunctional’ but the term will often understate the condition of a social system that has been effectively immobilised.

D’Abbs and MacLean (2000) go on to argue that the removal of chronic sniffers by means of statutory care and custody provisions runs counter to the whole purpose and rationale underlying contemporary Aboriginal child welfare legislation, which emphasises the need to maintain the integrity of Aboriginal family, kinship and community structures. This is debatable. The welfare and best interests of the child is the paramount principle for all statutory child protection services. Factors such as the need to maintain family, social contacts and ethnic and cultural identity are taken into account but these are subordinate to the protection of the child. Once an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child has been removed from the child’s family the general principle is that the child should be cared for within an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community.

It is not correct to say that when Child Protection Services determine that an Aboriginal child has been neglected and needs to be removed from his or her family, this is an action that runs counter to the purpose and rationale underlying Aboriginal child welfare legislation. All children have an equal right to protection from abuse and neglect regardless of racial background. On this point, an Aboriginal social worker working in the area of child protection in North Queensland makes a good point.

*“Cultural apology, also leads to planners and child abuse workers developing a two-tiered response between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Standards for what constitutes child abuse are allowed to drop for Aboriginal people because for some reason there exists a cultural rationale for the problem. Circumstances which would generate a child abuse intervention response in a non-Aboriginal family may similarly in an Aboriginal family not result in intervention (Paper titled: The Way Forward – cultural relevant practice responses to child abuse in Aboriginal communities in North Queensland, 1995, p.8).”*

Officially, the Queensland Government opposes a two-tiered response system. This position was endorsed by the recent inquiry into abuse of children in foster care by the Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commission which stated:

*“It is not the view of the Commission that there need be separate regimes for protective services applying to Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. While there are clearly issues specifically relating to Indigenous children that are not present (or not to the same degree) for most non-Indigenous children, this does not mean entirely separate services and/or delivery mechanisms need to be established (2004, p.229).”*

D’Abbs and MacLean’s (2000) final objection is that when petrol sniffers who were removed eventually return to their community there is no reason to suppose that they will not resume old habits. This is a central challenge that faces all practitioners. The ultimate goal is to stop the resumption of sniffing in the home community. It is this challenge that has prompted us to look at placing the most influential of chronic sniffers in introducing and maintaining the behaviour with Indigenous host families in a new environment as an alternative to outstations. As already mentioned, counselling has been tried and proven to be ineffectual and outstations cannot provide what chronic sniffers need most of all: the necessary stimulation, knowledge and skills for successful participation in the wider community.

## **Step 2: The provision of positive all-inclusive community and regional development programs for young people**

In order to create a real prospect of self-reliance and no resumption of petrol sniffing in home communities, it is necessary to go beyond the mere removal of the most influential of chronic sniffers and look at ways to make a strong investment in the growth of these individuals so that the sniffing behaviour is no longer appealing.

Cape York Partnerships, under the leadership of Noel Pearson, has been responsible for the development of many highly effective programs on Cape York Peninsula. Among them is the Boys from the Bush program which has now been formally evaluated. In Aurukun, a partnership between the Aurukun Shire Council, Education Queensland, Tropical North Queensland TAFE and Indigenous Enterprise Partnerships has developed the Aurukun Youth Strategy which is a multi-faceted

social, educational and financial program for 15-18 years old at-risk youth. The program requires that young participants negotiate a package involving: 1) engagement in a nominated real enterprise; 2) literacy, numeracy and workplace readiness course; 3) a vocational/skills training course; and 4) a personal savings plan towards a specific goal. For this they receive age-appropriate CDEP payments on a no-work no-pay basis. At the regional level, Cape York Partnerships - Balkanu, Apunipima, Westpac, Boston Consulting Group and Indigenous Enterprise Partnerships - have developed the Cape York Strategy. This strategy has three broad programs : 1) Family Development Program, 2) Community Development Program, and 3) Enterprise Development Program (Pearson, 2003). In addition, committed and appropriately trained youth workers have been employed to develop other genuinely engaging activities compatible with this petrol sniffing strategy.

Obviously, this approach goes beyond the risk factors associated with petrol sniffing. This is a “developmental approach”, focusing on a broader range of issues, the effectiveness of which will be evaluated annually.

### **Authority to place sniffers and challenges to this authority**

The implementation of this petrol sniffing control strategy has not been without its challenges. One of the challenges of Step 1 is dealing with the issue of authority to place, or re-place, the young person with a host family outside the community. In Mossman between 1999 and 2000, and again in Aurukun between 2001 and 2002, the authority was provided by Community Justice Groups. Difficulties began to occur in Aurukun in 2003 when the Justice Group became less willing to intervene in child-related matters. The Justice Group argued that they had no power to intervene and began to pull back from taking a leading role in the control of petrol sniffing. As a result, sniffing gradually returned to the community along with an increase in offending behaviour. This is in contrast to the Justice Group’s earlier willingness to assume a responsibility and take a more active role in the affairs of children and young people and where necessary confront them and their guardians on their failure to take responsibility for their actions or lack of action. It is argued by a number of commentators that Justice Groups are entitled to intervene on the basis of their moral, social and cultural authority (Alcohol and Drug Working Group, 2002). In essence, there was a fundamental shift in ideology from a focus on collective responsibility of the Community Justice Group members to a focus on individual legal rights of young sniffers, with the result that by mid 2003 the Aurukun Justice Group ceased to be effective in helping to control petrol sniffing in its community. By the end of 2003 all the chronic influential sniffers had returned to the community totally unchecked, resulting in the re-emergence of petrol sniffing. By December 2003, it was estimated that there were up to 50 young people sniffing at Aurukun – approximately the same number in 2001, before the implantation of this strategy.

A second related challenge has been the difficulty in gaining full cooperation from other Indigenous and non-Indigenous service providers. A number of writers have noted how indigenous communities are weighed down by scepticism, rivalries, jealousies, destructive politicking and people unwilling to relinquish or share their power (Pearson, 2001). This often results in the poor implementation and maintenance of programs, burn-out, lack of co-operation and co-ordination, valuable time wasted, lost opportunities and wasted resources. This strategy, like most other

strategies, did not receive the unanimous support from all stakeholders in both Step 1 and 2 (particularly from the Queensland Department of Families), resulting in a number of the above problems. See paper titled: *'The Practice of Placing Young Indigenous Offenders in an Alternative Environment with New Care Providers'* (James, 2003) [[www.boysfromthebush.org.au](http://www.boysfromthebush.org.au)].

### **Other challenges to this strategy**

In addition to the effectiveness of the Aurukun Youth Strategy being limited by the return of petrol sniffing in late 2003, Rothfield (2003) reports that the effectiveness of Step 2 is now being limited by several other factors.

- \* The way our society structures the public service agencies into a narrow specialist focus (on health or education or employment or justice) rather than servicing the holistic needs of the client.
- \* Competitiveness between and within agencies for resources and areas of prime influence with clients rather than cooperation and coordination.
- \* The accountability process required minimising risk rather than maximising client outcomes, and encourages misleading representation of data (if collected at all).
- \* The focus of agencies on short-term programs which change every 18 months rather than long-term persistent initiatives that work by review and continual improvement over time.
- \* The welfare system and years of broken promises have encouraged clients to focus on short-term rewards rather than long-term investment in their futures, and also to play off the different agencies to maximise these rewards.

Similarly, I have concluded from my own experience that much of this behaviour stems from the nature of human service work and human service organisations. Jones and May (1994) note that many workers in human service organisations are unclear about their role and they experience considerable doubt about the effectiveness and meaning of their work. A source of considerable frustration is the conflicting and ambiguous goals and activities of the organisation in which they work, often resulting in unclear and contradictory expectations. They perceive a lack of control over the factors shaping the lives of those who they are employed to serve and their inability to deal with the root causes of social and personal problems. Relations with clients, while sometimes meaningful and positive are often characterised by disappointment, disagreement and conflict. This, combined with heavy workloads and limited resources, all too often results in workers using their discretionary powers and right of choice to further their own need for empowerment and appeasing their organisation, rather than working in the best interests of their client.

### **Summary**

In summary, this petrol sniffing control strategy is based on the primary causes and transmission processes of sniffing. It is a two step approach carried out by the coordinated efforts of a number of organisations and programs. Step 1 is the identification and placement of the most influential in introducing and maintaining petrol sniffing with chosen carers in different communities. Step 2 focuses on the greater number of lesser users or potential users by providing all inclusive community and regional development programs.

This strategy is replicable and scalable. Similar strategies have apparently been applied in other remote areas like Yuendumu, where petrol sniffers are placed in another environment (Step 1) while preventative strategies are developed in the home community (Step 2). This strategy builds on and refines those approaches. The essential difference in Step 1 is that it is more efficient as it focuses on the most influential only and ensures by careful placement with distant indigenous host families, rather than remote outstations, that this new environment challenges the young people to acquire skills and experiences to engage in the modern non-welfare economy. One of the important features of Step 1 is that it is decentralised and remains small. A small lean organisation can assess, place, manage and monitor placements with suitable host families in a distant location more efficiently.

The development and implementation of this strategy has been challenging. We not only had to deal with the intellectual confusion circulating in the literature and between lay practitioners and academics with little grass-roots experience, but we also had to deal with the widespread scepticism, rivalries, jealousies, destructive politicking, shifting loyalties and ideologies and people unwilling to relinquish or share their power. Nevertheless, when and where fully implemented, the strategy had proven to be highly effective in its objectives. More work needs to be done in the areas of long-term rehabilitation of chronic sniffers and building the confidence of Community Justice Groups to fulfil their responsibility.

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