

Stopping Petrol Sniffing in Remote Aboriginal Communities: Key factors in the success of the Mt Theo Program

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Petrol sniffing is a major form of substance misuse in Aboriginal communities across Australia. This behaviour is having detrimental effects on the health and wellbeing of individual sniffers, their families, communities and wider society. There are few examples of programs that have successfully addressed petrol sniffing. This paper looks at the Mt Theo Program, regularly cited as “the success story” in petrol sniffing interventions. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate key elements that have contributed towards Mt Theo Program’s unique success. (1) Initially, a Multifaceted approach including an outstation and youth program, (2) Community initiated, operated, owned basis of the organization, which incorporates (3) Strong Partnership between Indigenous and non - Indigenous team members and (4), An ability to operate beyond crisis intervention.

Introduction

Petrol sniffing involves the deliberate inhalation of petrol fumes to achieve an alteration in mood and mental state. Petrol sniffing belongs broader category of activity known as inhalant misuse, a common form of substance misuse among youth from minority populations in many developed countries. Within Australia, despite sporadic reports of its practice in regional centres, sniffing is largely considered an issue related to remote Indigenous communities.

Petrol sniffing has detrimental effects on the health and wellbeing of individual sniffers, their families, communities and wider society. Over 40 young people have died from sniffing in Central Australia since 1998ⁱ. Department of Health and Community Services estimates that there are currently 15 seriously disabled and brain-damaged ex-sniffers being cared for in Alice Springs alone, and this number is expected to rise to 60 in the next ten yearsⁱⁱ. Given that the cost of institutional care for brain damaged ex-petrol sniffers is estimated at \$150,000-160,000, costs of over \$9million per annum could be

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expected if petrol sniffing is not addressedⁱⁱ. This is without taking into account the social disruptions at the community level as petrol sniffing intensifies violence, vandalism and damage to property. Obviously, petrol sniffing is an issue in need of urgent interventions.

There are few models from which to draw insights in developing a successful petrol sniffing prevention program. Where programs to address petrol sniffing in Australia have been developed, few have had little long-term impact on sniffing levels. Many different strategies have been tried throughout Australia including education programs, outstations, recreation programs, introduction of Av Gas, using Aboriginal culture, night patrols, individual and family counselling, and statutory sanctions. There is broad consensus that effective interventions are community based and have concurrent strategies to address sniffingⁱⁱⁱ. However petrol sniffing intervention remains an area “generally marked by failure”. In a recent comprehensive review into petrol sniffing interventions in Australia, for example, D’Abbs & MacLean conclude that ‘we have seen that petrol sniffing is very difficult to eradicate permanently’^{iv}. In addition, the experience and understanding that has been acquired by individuals and groups in addressing petrol sniffing is dispersed and often unpublished. There is little public information to guide those interested in establishing interventions to address petrol sniffing.

To illicit key elements of an effective intervention for petrol sniffing, this paper examines the Mt Theo Program, a program that has achieved rare success in stopping petrol sniffing at the community and regional level. The Mt Theo Program, based in the remote community of Yuendumu, is increasingly being held up as a “best practice model” in preventing petrol sniffing in Australia. In a review of petrol sniffing interventions, Mt Theo Program was cited as one of few examples from which future programs could draw positive insights to base their work^{iv}. Within the media and Australian political arena there is a growing sense that Mt Theo Program provides a “sign of hope”^{v3} and “we should look to Mt Theo as a model for eradicating petrol sniffing”^{vi4}. This paper seeks to answer the often asked question “why has this program worked where others generally fail?? While employees of the program have written insightful papers^{vii}, ^{viii}, ^{ix}, and short reviews of been conducted by politicians and journalists^{x5}, as yet there is not published information regarding the factors involved that were involved in the Mt Theo success that may be applied elsewhere.

This paper can not offer a blueprint for addressing sniffing. Obviously, the Mt Theo Program can not be replicated wholesale as it was developed in a specific context and is inherently based around particular people, and a particular community. (Some would argue nor should this program be replicated, as it is not uniformly exemplary). However, elements of the Mt Theo Program that have contributed towards its unusual success can

be gleaned to guide action towards addressing crisis levels of petrol sniffing in remote Aboriginal communities.

This paper provides a brief history and overview of the Mt Theo Program before demonstrating that the multifaceted and community based nature of the program involving a strong partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers, as well as the ability to move beyond crisis intervention are the key factors in the success of the Mt Theo Program.

OVERVIEW OF THE MT THEO PROGRAM

Mt Theo Program is based out of Yuendumu, a remote Aboriginal community located 300km north west of Alice Springs, Northern Territory. Yuendumu is the largest community in Central Australia with a fluctuating population of around 800 people, of whom approximately 90% are Indigenous, with Warlpiri as their first language.

History of the Mt Theo Program

The Mt Theo Program began in 1994 as a community initiative to address the crisis of petrol sniffing in Yuendumu. At this stage there were more than 70 young people sniffing petrol in Yuendumu every week - the majority of the teenage population. Peter Toyne, former Yuendumu School Principle and current NT Education Minister, stated at this time there were more kids sniffing in the school grounds at night than attending school during the day^{viii}.

“youth culture was dominated by petrol.... sniffers would actively recruit students from school to come sniff with them during school hours...the chronic sniffers lived away from their families in sniffing ghettos where they would sniff for over twelve hours a day, sometimes falling asleep with petrol cans wedged under their noses...” (pers. Com).

Yuendumu community members attempted to deal with the crisis of sniffing in numerous ways, including night patrols, taking kids to live at other communities or out bush, public floggings and youth activities. These interventions enjoyed varying degrees of short-term success however, the problem remained. There was general community consensus that something needed to be done (don't know how to reference that is what everyone here says...).

In February 1994 another community meeting was held to discuss the issue of petrol sniffing and possible ways of addressing it. At that meeting it was stated that

“petrol sniffing..this time its different, we've tried to stop it...it hasn't worked. So Yuendumu is facing a future where its young people will be crazy, sick and poisoned...many will be dead before they are thirty”^{xi}

The idea of sending young people to an outstation had been suggested numerous times, prior to this meeting and had strong community backing. At this meeting, Peggy Brown, a strong elder, who had a history of caring for young people from other families and many of her own children sniffing, agreed to look after all the chronic petrol sniffers from Yuendumu on her husband's country Mt Theo. Traditional owners of the land agreed for their country to be used. Peggy and her family moved out to Mt Theo with the chronic sniffers, (most of them Peggy's family). The non-Indigenous school liaison officer was released of his normal duties to drive sniffers and rations to the outstation. In the early years, community members and organizations offered support in the form of food, fuel, vehicle use and personal time. Thus began the Mt Theo Program.

Program Overview

The nuts and bolts of the program are very simple. If a young person sniffs petrol in Yuendumu, following consultation and agreement by family, they are taken to Mt Theo Outstation for one month. At the remote Mt Theo Outstation, elders love and care for the young people. The outstation is entirely Aboriginal run and elders often engage young people in discussions about issues in their lives, jukurrpa (Dreamtime law and stories) and go hunting for bush foods. Young people informally learn traditional arts and crafts. Elders talk with and pray for the young people. A non-Indigenous youth worker visits the outstation once or twice a week to take out rations and provide extra support as necessary. In the past, when there is available funding and staff, a teacher has conducted lessons in literacy, maths and horticulture.

Facilities at Mt Theo are incredibly basic as shown in photo. Food is cooked on campfire, everyone sleeps outside, water comes from one of three running taps. When resources are available a teacher or clinic staff visit Mt Theo to provide education and health care. After one month's respite at Mt Theo, young people are allowed back to Yuendumu. If they sniff petrol again, they are taken straight back to Mt Theo.

Simultaneously, there is a youth activities program operating in Yuendumu to divert young people away from petrol sniffing behaviour. The youth program includes: a youth drop in centre, basketball, football, softball, disco and other activities as available.

The operation of the Mt Theo Program is shown in the painting below, by Maxine Nungaryi Spencer (previous Mt Theo Chairwoman)....

Over the last four years the Mt Theo Program has developed dramatically. While the prevention of petrol sniffing remains at the core of the program, Mt Theo Program now works to assist young people to create positive futures beyond substance misuse and other dysfunctional behaviour.

Today the Mt Theo Program incorporates four main arms of Service;

1 – Stopping Petrol Sniffing in the Warlpiri Zone

2 – The Jaru Pirrjirdi (Strong Voices) Youth Development Project – *“young people working together to create positive futures for themselves and their community”*

3 – Youth Diversionary Program-

4 - Education and Outreach - *“sharing the story of hope”*

The success: “A petrol free generation”

Eleven years after the development of the Mt Theo Program, petrol sniffing is almost completely absent from the Yuendumu community and the entire Warlpiri nation. Over the last three years Yuendumu has experienced predominant absence of sniffing. Youth culture in Yuendumu has changed and no longer includes petrol sniffing. There is a strong stigma against sniffing. As Stojanovski has proudly stated, young people in Yuendumu today are growing up as a “petrol free generation”. Yuendumu community now has the capacity to respond immediately to any sniffing behaviour ensuring that petrol sniffing will never reach crisis levels again.

FACTORS INVOLVED IN THE SUCCESS OF THE MT THEO PROGRAM

1 - MULTIFACETED APPROACH

The Mt Theo Program adopted a multi-faceted approach to stopping petrol sniffing involving the use of an outstation and the provision of youth activities. The combination of strategies used in Yuendumu was able to facilitate a change in youth culture to the extent that sniffing is completely absent from the community today. There is general consensus, among those researching petrol sniffing interventions, that a number of concurrent strategies are necessary for effectively minimising petrol sniffing, as no one strategy can address all the associated issues singularly^{iv,xii}. The importance of each of the strategies used in Yuendumu’s early campaign against petrol sniffing is briefly outlined below (for more detail see Stojanovski 1999).

Outstation –

Mt Theo Outstation was a critical factor in the success of the program. Mt Theo was established as a community response to petrol sniffing that sent a clear message to young people that sniffing is not acceptable in Yuendumu^{xiii}. Sending young people to Mt Theo if they sniffed was a harm minimisation strategy for chronic petrol sniffers. This action eroded the sniffing culture in Yuendumu as the chronic petrol sniffers were no longer in the community and able to exert peer pressure to influence other young people to sniff. Sending sniffers to Mt Theo also provided a real and immediate disincentive to sniffing petrol in Yuendumu. Young people knew if they sniffed petrol they would be sent to Mt Theo thus interfering with valued aspects of their lives and causing young people to abandon the habit^{xiv}. In addition, Mt Theo gave Yuendumu community a respite from petrol sniffers, with the knowledge that they were safe under the care of kin^{iv}.

The logistics of the outstation are important to briefly note. Particularly, Mt Theo is located 160 km from Yuendumu and over 50km from the nearest road which meant that, when petrol sniffers tried to walk away, (which they did quite regularly) they knew they couldn't make it back before being picked up again. An outstation initially set up for female sniffers from Yuendumu failed as it was located too close to the highway and young women would walk to the road and hitch a ride back to Yuendumu. Mt Theo is culturally known as a "healing place" with strong Jukurrpa (Dreamtime Law and stories associated with the country). The land at Mt Theo is thought to nurture and heal young people who reside there. Importantly, Mt Theo is an outstation owned and controlled by local Indigenous people who really want to live on their country and care for young people.

Youth Program

The other important aspect of the Mt Theo Program was a vibrant youth activities program to divert young people away from petrol sniffing through providing positive alternatives. With reference to youth programs, the Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Council of South Australia write that "most people think that these activities have been successful in reducing sniffing that happens in their community". Within Yuendumu, it is generally accepted that youth activities were an important factor in changing youth culture away from sniffing. For example, Lloyd Jungarrayai Spencer describes, "We won the sniffers through disco videos and football"^{xv}. By youth workers putting youth activities they were also able to provide after care to past sniffers on reintroduction to Yuendumu. Being around young people until late into the night at the activities, the youth workers were able to keep in touch with at risk youth to address sniffing before it happened and intervene promptly in sniffing behaviour. The new developments of having youth leaders providing much of the sport and recreation in Yuendumu also provides an opportunity for meaningful productive employment of young people, previously considered 'at risk'.

COMMUNITY INITIATED AND OWNED

The Mt Theo Program is a community initiated, supported and operated program, this community focus is an essential factor in its ongoing success. There is broad consensus within relevant literature that “the most successful strategies are initiated by the community, enjoy widespread community support and involve strong participation of community members”^{xvi}. The Mt Theo Program was developed through strong community resolve by Warlpiri people in response to the local crisis of petrol sniffing. Aboriginal people whose own children were sniffing developed and still run the Mt Theo Program. The people working on the program, and indeed all members of the community, had a personal stake in its success. The program initially operated with limited resources gained almost entirely from within the community, which both demonstrated and arguably, increased community ownership of the program. While the program now enjoys outside support, decisions are still based on what works best for the community and individual clients, rather than being made purely to abide by directives from funding bodies or other people/agencies outside the community.

The painting below demonstrates the relationships within the community that maintain the Mt Theo Program.

The Mt Theo Program not only built upon, but also strengthened and created, cohesive community support for the anti-petrol sniffing campaign. A major challenge to community action to address sniffing is that the family, rather than the community remains the major social unit in Aboriginal “communities”, holding primary responsibility for social issues like petrol sniffing. Culturally, children are not allowed to be looked after by another family group and if a young person gets sick or injured or dies while with another family group, then under tribal law, whether or not they’ve had anything to do with the incident they could be punished, possibly by spearing^{xvii}. It was very special Indigenous people in Yuendumu who were willing to take this risk. Families in Yuendumu felt safe to hand over their trust and responsibility to the particular Indigenous and non-Indigenous people involved in the Mt Theo Program.

PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS COWORKERS

Perhaps the most important factor in the success of the Mt Theo Program is the strong cross-cultural partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people co-workers. “The community” mentioned above, an integral factor in the success of the Mt Theo Program does not only refer to local Indigenous people – non-Indigenous community members were also supportive and absolutely essential to the establishment and ongoing maintenance of the Program^{xviii}). As noted in the minutes from the first working party, petrol sniffing is “not going to be fixed if Yapa (Aboriginal People) 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 work together to fix it now!” Petrol is a

substance that was introduced to Aboriginal people following their interactions with non-Indigenous people, there are no traditional laws for dealing with sniffing, therefore wider Australian society has a responsibility to assist in addressing this problem^{xxix}. For Indigenous people to address petrol sniffing, generally requires them to step outside their cultural boundaries, only strong cross-cultural relationships will sustain this. Blaire McFarland, CAYLUS coordinator, recognises that there are Indigenous people in almost every community where sniffing occurs with “all the will in the world to stop petrol sniffing” what is lacking is the non-Indigenous partners to help get their initiatives off the ground^{xxx}. While politicians continue to blame local communities for not taking greater action^{xxxi}, without a strong on-the-ground partnership, it is difficult for even the most dedicated and hard working Indigenous people to gain access to resources and mediate between competing interests that are necessary for creating a successful anti-petrol sniffing campaign.

Non-Indigenous people have played an integral role in the success of the Mt Theo petrol sniffing prevention program. While there are three other petrol sniffer respite outstations in Central Australia, Mt Theo is the only one with full-time Non-Indigenous support and CAYLUS believes that dedicated non-Indigenous workers would create the capacity to stop petrol sniffing in these communities as well. Obviously, Non-Indigenous team members of a petrol sniffing prevention program play an essential role in gaining necessary resources and liaising between different worldviews of government and communities, which requires high levels of literacy and the obligations of whitefella culture beyond what most remote Indigenous people are willing or able to accept. Non-Indigenous partners must also manage program resources and ensure that Indigenous workers abide by the rules that they have decided on at committee level^{xxxi}. In addition, Non-Indigenous people can somewhat step outside the kinship obligations and relate to all family groups equally, allowing for every sniffing action to be dealt with equally and promptly, regardless of the particular family group. In this way, non-Indigenous partners also play a huge role in creating and strengthening cohesive community support for the initiative. To carry out these important duties, it is essential that the particular non-Indigenous people involved have an understanding of local issues, Indigenous social structures and are willing to act culturally appropriately.

Strong cross-cultural partnerships between co-workers enabled Mt Theo Program to overcome common challenges to petrol sniffing interventions such as the norm of self-autonomy and non-interference strong within Aboriginal society. In Yuendumu, as in Aboriginal society generally, parents do not have the authority to force young people to do something against their will. Young people have the right to do what they please with their own bodies and in this way “petrol sniffers exploit the ‘loopholes’ in what is, for the most part, a highly workable system”^{xxxiii}. Strong cross-cultural relationships enabled families, and workers to act on sniffing behaviour in such a way as they can defer responsibility, to a community organization or other individuals, for an action that culturally appears harsh or unkind, such as sending young people to Mt Theo or not allowing them back to Yuendumu when they get homesick^{xxxiv}.

Importantly, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous team members provide each other necessary support through personal relationships, which is key to maintaining ongoing motivation to work in this demanding field. There is an emerging body of anthropological literature demonstrating that Aboriginal people are not primarily motivated to work by the expectation of wages or the actual job, but by the personal relationship between boss and worker and the reciprocal obligations involved^{xxv}. More than wages, personal relationships of mutual obligation, (demonstrated through letting co-workers use the telephone or washing machine, providing food when co-workers or their family are hungry, etc) sustain Indigenous co-workers, particularly when there work causes them to miss out on important cultural events or bend cultural rules. Non-Indigenous workers of the program are also supported by these strong cross-cultural friendships reducing non-Indigenous staff turnover (pers. Com. – liam and yaka). Stojanovski surmises ‘what I really believe sustains our program...is the love and relationships that we hold for each other as co-workers....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’^{xxvi}

THE ABILITY TO MOVE BEYOND CRISIS INTERVENTION AND RESPOND TO BROADER COMMUNITY ISSUES

Today, while petrol sniffing is absent in Yuendumu, the community maintains the capacity to deal with any outbreak of sniffing through a broadened focus. Many organizations that are set up to deal with petrol sniffing cease once the crisis is perceived to have passed, only to have petrol sniffing arise again^{xxvii}. A review of the Mt Theo Program conducted in 2001 found that while the program has had ‘long term success in containing petrol sniffing in Yuendumu...If the program were to cease...this would almost certainly result in petrol sniffing becoming a much greater problem in the Yuendumu community’^{xxviii}. The Mt Theo Program has been able to move beyond stopping petrol sniffing by taking a regional approach and shifting its focus to addressing the issues underlying substance misuse behaviour. On the occasions that sniffing has occurred in Yuendumu, over the last few years, this behaviour has been dealt with quickly and efficiently through the use of the outstation.

While the Mt Theo Program has successfully dealt with petrol sniffing, the challenge is now to assist young people in creating positive lives beyond substance misuse. Alcohol and marijuana abuse by Warlpiri young people are now major issues. During the week of writing this paper there were nine reported attempted suicides in the Central Australian region, two from Yuendumu, both marijuana related. Many young people from Yuendumu, the majority of them past petrol sniffers, are drifting into Alice Springs with the explicit purpose to drink alcohol and from there are falling into a cycle of alcoholism. Lawyers from Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid observe that over 90% of their criminal work involving young people from Yuendumu is associated with substance misuse related crime. To address this new crisis, Mt Theo Program has developed the Jaru Pirrjirdi (strong voices) youth development project. Based on action research

principles, Jaru Pirrjirdi is about addressing issues underlying youth substance misuse in Yuendumu. Yuendumu community members particularly young people, are now working to assist youth in creating strong futures both for themselves and their communities. Now there is not only the Mt Theo Committee, but also a growing team of youth leaders working with enthusiasm and commitment to ‘make Yuendumu a better place so other young people don’t want to sniff petrol, drink grog or smoke gunja’. (be great to say see PD’s story).

CONCLUSION

The Mt Theo Program has achieved unique success in stopping petrol sniffing in the remote community of Yuendumu. This paper has shown that the key factors involved in the rare achievements of the Mt Theo Program are the 1 – the multifaceted nature of the program 2 – community basis 3 – the strong cross-cultural relationships and 4 – ability to move beyond crisis intervention. This case study may provide assistance to others interested in developing petrol sniffing interventions.

ⁱ Central Australian Youth Link Up Service. Submission to the Coronial Inquiry into the Deaths of Kunmanara Brumby, Kunmanara Coulthard and Kumanjayi Presley. July 2005. Unpublished Paper.

ⁱⁱ Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory. 2004. “Petrol Sniffing in Remote Northern Territory Communities: Final Report” Northern Territory Select Committee on Substance Abuse in the Community (online)
<http://www.nt.gov.au/lant/parliament/committees/substance/Petrol>

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^{iv} D’Abbs, P & McLean, S. 2000. Petrol sniffing in Aboriginal Communities: A review of Interventions, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health, Casurina. p81

^v Metheral, M. 2000. “a sign of hope for petrol sniffers”. Sydney Morning Herald. 8/09/00

^{vi} Scullion, N. September 2005 “Petrol sniffing interventions will save lives”
www.senatorscullion.com/news,

see also Following a visit to Yuendumu, Federal Minister for Health Tony Abbott for example, described Mt Theo Program as a “success story” and suggested that petrol sniffing interventions should follow the lead of Mt Theo Program.

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- vii see Stojanovski, A. 1994. The Yuendumu Story – About Petrol Sniffing: July 1993 through to September 1994. Unpublished paper commissioned by Petrol Link UP and funded through National Drug Strategy.
- viii Stojanovski, A. 1999. Mt Theo Story 1999 – Tribal Elders working with petrol sniffers. Unpublished paper prepared for the Drug and Alcohol Council Conference (SA)
- ix Campbell, L. & Stojanovski, A. 2000. ????
- x x Lees 2000, Metheral 2000, Toohey 2000, Donnan 2002, etc etc
- xi xi Minutes from the first working party meeting regarding substance misuse in Yuendumu
- xii Shaw, G., Armstrong, W. & San Roque, C. 1995. *Petrol Link Up*, Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, Canberra (see Shaw et al 1994, d'Abbs 2000 etc etc).
- xiii xiii (see also Shaw 1994: 15).
- xiv xiv (see Brady...).
- xv xv (– see Yaka's 1994 article
- xvi xvi (d'Abbs & MacLean 2000: v).
- xvii xvii (ref and SMH 10/12/01). (see some ref).
- xviii xviii (need to footnote that it can be Indigenous people from other places too – just people that stand outside the kinship obligations
- xix xix (see Craig San Roque and Andrew Japiljarri Spencer
- xx xx (pers. Comm. 18/08/05
- xxi
- xxii xxii (see folds, etc for programs have folded due to jealousies over resources....)
- xxiii xxiii Brady, M. 1992, *Social Meaning of Petrol Sniffing*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra. p 74).
- xxiv The new legislation, known as ???, that gives police the power to take young petrol sniffers to a safe place will assist concerned families in removing their young people from communities where they are sniffing to a respite outstation.
- xxv xxv Muscharbash p 159
- xxvi xxvi (Stojanovski 1999: 26).
- xxvii xxvii (Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory 2003, Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory 2002, Stojanovski 2002a, D'Abbs & Maclean 2000, Roper & Shaw 1996).
- xxviii Network Australia Consulting. 2002. *Review of Petrol Sniffing Programs in Central Australia*. Unpublished Document. p24.