

Stopping petrol sniffing in remote Aboriginal Australia: key elements of the Mt Theo Program

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Abstract

*Petrol sniffing is a major form of substance misuse in Aboriginal communities across Australia. This practice has detrimental effects on the health and wellbeing of individual sniffers, their families, communities and wider society. There are few examples of programmes that have successfully stopped 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 rare achievement: (1) initially, a multi-faceted approach including an outstation and youth programme, (2) community-initiated, operated, owned basis of the organisation, which incorporates (3) strong partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous team members and (4) an ability to operate beyond crisis intervention. [Preuss K, Napanangka Brown J. Stopping petrol sniffing in remote Aboriginal Australia: key elements of the Mt Theo Program. *Drug Alcohol Rev* 2006;25:189–193]*

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Introduction

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

Petrol sniffing has detrimental effects on the health and wellbeing of individual sniffers, their families, communities and wider society. The deaths of more than 40 young people have been attributed to sniffing-related causes in Central Australia since 1998 [1]. In a report to the Select Committee on Substance Abuse, the authors estimated that health costs of over \$9 million per annum can be expected if petrol sniffing is not addressed [2]. This figure does not take into account the social disruptions at the family and community levels, as petrol sniffing intensifies violence, vandalism and damage to property. Obviously, petrol sniffing is an issue in need of urgent intervention.

Consensus suggests that effective interventions are community-based and employ concurrent strategies to address sniffing [1–4]. However, in a recent review of interventions, d’Abbs & MacLean concluded that ‘... petrol sniffing is very difficult to eradicate permanently’ [3]. There is a paucity of published material on successful interventions. Thus, the experience and understanding acquired by individuals and groups in addressing petrol sniffing is dispersed and largely unpublished, and there is little to guide those interested in establishing interventions.

This paper provides an insider’s account of the Mt Theo Program. The programme has successfully reduced the number of petrol sniffers from seventy to zero at Yuendumu and has achieved a long-term absence of petrol sniffing within the community and surrounding region. Academics, politicians and journalists are increasingly citing Mt Theo as a ‘best practice model’ in preventing petrol sniffing [1–3,5–9]. This paper seeks to answer the question: ‘Why has this programme worked where others generally fail?’ While employees of the programme have written

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insightful papers [10–12] and short reviews have been conducted by politicians and journalists [9,13], as yet there is no published information regarding the factors involved in the Mt Theo success that may be applied elsewhere.

Overview of the Mt Theo Program

The Mt Theo Program is based out of Yuendumu, a remote Aboriginal community 300 km northwest of Alice Springs, Northern Territory. Yuendumu is the largest Aboriginal community in Central Australia, with a population fluctuating between 800 and 1000 people, of whom approximately 90% are Aboriginal, with Warlpiri as their first language.

The Mt Theo Program began in 1994 as a community initiative to address the crisis of petrol sniffing in Yuendumu. At that time Stojanovski estimated there were more than 70 young people sniffing petrol in Yuendumu every week—the majority of the teenage population. Peter Toyne, former Yuendumu School Principal and current NT Minister for Health, stated that there were more kids sniffing in the school grounds at night than attending school during the day [10].

Everyone was sniffing petrol (Larissa Granites, Youth Leader and Mentor, former petrol sniffer).

... the worst petrol sniffers lived in [abandoned houses] away from their families. They would sniff petrol all day and fall asleep with that petrol under their nose. (Johnny Miller, traditional owner and long time carer, Mt Theo)

Yuendumu community members had attempted stop sniffing through night patrols, taking kids to other communities, public ‘floggings’ and youth activities. These interventions enjoyed varying degrees of short-term success. However, the problem remained and there was general community consensus that something else needed to be done.

In February 1994, at a community meeting was held to discuss the issue. At the meeting it was recorded 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 [14].

The idea of sending young people to an outstation had been suggested numerous times, and had strong community backing. At this meeting, Peggy Brown—an elder, who had a history of caring for young people from other families and for many of her own children who had been sniffing—agreed to look after all the chronic petrol sniffers from Yuendumu on her hus-

band’s country, Mt Theo (Purtulu), where she was residing. Traditional owners of the land agreed for their country to be used. A non-Aboriginal school liaison officer was released from his normal duties to drive sniffers and rations to the outstation. In the early years, community members and organisations offered support in the form of food, fuel, vehicle use and personal time. Thus began the Mt Theo Program.

The ‘nuts and bolts’ of the programme are simple. If a young person sniffs petrol in Yuendumu, following consultation and agreement by family he or she is taken to Mt Theo Outstation for 1 month. The outstation is entirely Aboriginal run and elders: talk with young people about issues in their lives and *jukurrpa* (Dreaming); take them hunting for bush foods; and love, care and pray for the young people. A non-Aboriginal youth worker visits the outstation approximately twice a week to take out rations and provide extra support as necessary. When available, a teacher or clinic staff visit Mt Theo to provide education and health care. Facilities at Mt Theo are basic. While there is now a generator, food is cooked on campfire, everyone sleeps outside and water comes from outside taps. After 1 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. Concurrently, there is a youth activities programme operating in Yuendumu to divert young people away from petrol sniffing.

Over the last 4 years the Mt Theo Program has developed dramatically. While the prevention of sniffing remains at its core, the Program has expanded and now encompasses four main arms of service.

- (1) *Prevention of Petrol sniffing throughout the Warlpiri Zone.* At the discretion of Aboriginal supervisors, the Program now works with all four Warlpiri communities and Alice Springs agencies to assist any young Warlpiri person who is sniffing.
- (2) *The Jaru Pirrjirdi (Strong Voices) Youth Development Project.* A major focus of the Mt Theo Program today is working with youth and community leaders in Yuendumu to address broader substance misuse.
- (3) *Youth Diversionary Program.* This involves a vibrant 7-days-a-week youth activities programme, including vacation care, mostly provided by youth leaders.
- (4) *Education and Outreach Program.* Through this, Mt Theo Program regularly conducts educational workshops and interviews regarding the ‘story of hope’, at a local, regional, national and international scale.

The Program now receives its primary funding through the Australian Government Department of Health and

Ageing, the Foundation for Young Australian's and the Alcohol, Education and Rehabilitation Foundation.

Twelve years after the beginnings of the Mt Theo Program, petrol sniffing is virtually non-existent in Yuendumu community and the entire Warlpiri nation. The Program has successfully reduced the number of petrol sniffers in Yuendumu from 70 to zero over a 9-year period [15]. Over 400 petrol sniffers have been cared for at Mt Theo and have stopped sniffing. As Peggy Brown, programme founder states, 'these young ones, they don't sniff petrol now' [pers.comm. 2005]. The Mt Theo team, including youth leaders, describe that young people in Yuendumu are growing up in a community where sniffing is not tolerated. While sniffing still occurs on rare occasions, Yuendumu community has demonstrated its capacity to respond immediately to any sniffing behaviour, ensuring that it will not reach crisis levels again [15].

The ability of a local community to stop petrol sniffing and its destructive effects has caused many to ask: 'Why has it worked in Yuendumu? What can be learnt from this experience to stop sniffing in other areas?'

Factors involved in the success of the Mt Theo Program

Multi-faceted approach

The Mt Theo Program adopted a multi-faceted approach to petrol sniffing involving the use of an outstation and the provision of youth activities. A number of concurrent strategies are necessary for effectively minimising sniffing, as no one strategy can address all the associated issues [2–4,16]. The importance of the strategies used in Yuendumu's early campaign against petrol sniffing is outlined briefly below.

The *Mt Theo Outstation* was a critical factor in the success of the programme. It sent a clear message to young people that sniffing is not acceptable in Yuendumu and also gave the community a respite from sniffers [2–4,16]. Sending young people to Mt Theo if they sniffed was a harm minimisation strategy for chronic petrol sniffers, eroded the sniffing culture, as chronic sniffers were no longer able to influence others to sniff and provided a real and immediate disincentive to sniffing, as it interfered with valued aspects sniffers' lives, thus causing young people to eventually abandon the habit [17].

The *location* of the outstation is important. Mt Theo is 160 km from Yuendumu and over 50 km from the nearest major road, so sniffers knew they could not get back to Yuendumu before being picked up (although some often tried). The country of Mt Theo is important culturally, with strong *Jukurpa* (Dreaming) and is

known as a 'healing place' that nurtures people who reside there. Importantly, Mt Theo is owned and controlled by local Warlpiri people who want to live on their country and care for young people.

The other aspect of the Mt Theo Program is that the youth activities programme provides positive alternatives to petrol sniffing. It includes sports, discos, film nights and cultural activities. These have been an important factor in changing youth culture away from sniffing. Lloyd Jungarrayi Spencer states, 'We won the sniffers through disco, videos and football' [10]. Presence at nightly youth activities also enabled youth workers to keep in touch with at-risk youth and sniffing behaviour. Now, many 'at risk' young people, including ex-sniffers, are employed as youth workers as a protective effect against substance misuse [3].

Community-initiated and owned

There is consensus that 'the most successful strategies are initiated by the community, enjoy widespread community support and involve strong participation of community members' [3]. The Mt Theo Program is a community-initiated, supported and operated programme—another essential factor in its ongoing success. Warlpiri people whose own children were sniffing developed and run the Program. It operated initially with limited resources provided almost entirely from within the community, which demonstrated community commitment to resolving the problems of their youth and, arguably, increased community ownership of the programme. While the Program now enjoys outside support, decisions are still made by the programme's Aboriginal management committee.

A major challenge for community action on sniffing is that families, rather than communities, hold primary responsibility for addressing social issues such as sniffing in Aboriginal settlements [17,20]. Culturally, children should not be looked after by another family group and if a young person becomes sick, injured or dies while with another family group, then that group can be punished under customary law [18]. Showing incredible courage and determination, Aboriginal elders at Mt Theo took this risk and, after negotiation, families in Yuendumu, trusted the supervisors at Mt Theo with their children. Extensive community engagement by programme staff has both created, developed and strengthened community support for the anti-petrol sniffing campaign.

Partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal co-workers

Perhaps the most important factor in the success of the Mt Theo Program is the strong cross-cultural partnerships between co-workers. 'The community'

mentioned above refers not only to local Warlpiri people; non-Warlpiri community members were also supportive and essential to the establishment and ongoing maintenance of the Program. This was noted from the beginnings of the programme 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! [14]

Brady and Spencer contend that petrol is a substance that was introduced to Aboriginal people, therefore responsibility for solutions must be shared with wider Australian society [17,19].

Non-Aboriginal team members play an essential role in sniffing interventions. They can gain and manage necessary resources, and liaise between government agencies and communities (with their different world-views) to an extent beyond which most remote Aboriginal people are willing or able to do [20]. Importantly, non-Aboriginal people, without strong Aboriginal kinship obligations, can relate to all Aboriginal family groups equally—allowing for every sniffing action to be dealt with promptly, regardless of family affiliations.

Strong cross-cultural partnerships between co-workers enabled the Mt Theo Program to overcome common cross-cultural challenges to petrol sniffing interventions. In Yuendumu, as in Aboriginal society generally, norms of self-autonomy and non-interference mean that parents do not have the authority to force young people to do something against their will. This allows ‘petrol sniffers [to] exploit these “loopholes” in what is, for the most part, a very workable system’ [17]. From an Aboriginal child-raising perspective, sending young people to Mt Theo, or not allowing them back to Yuendumu when they become homesick, may appear unkind [11,17,18]. Strong cross-cultural relationships enabled families and programme workers to act on sniffing behaviour while deferring responsibility for these actions to the programme or other individuals.

Importantly, cross-cultural relationships provide necessary support and ongoing motivation to work in this demanding field. An emerging body of anthropological literature demonstrates that personal relationships provide greater motivation for Aboriginal people than the expectation of wages or the actual job [21]. Peggy Brown states:

I love those petrol sniffers, even if they’re not family . . . you [non-Aboriginal co-workers] have got to support . . . give me food when I’m hungry one.

Relationships of mutual obligation sustain Indigenous co-workers, particularly when their work impacts on important cultural events. These relationships can also support non-Aboriginal staff and reduce staff turnover. Stojanovski writes:

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 [11].

While four petrol sniffer respite outstations currently operate in Central Australia, Mt Theo is the only one attracting full-time non-Aboriginal support. It is believed that dedicated non-Aboriginal workers with the other outstation programmes would create the capacity to stop sniffing in the serviced communities (Blair McFarland, Coordinator, Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service: pers. comm., August 2005). Non-Aboriginal partners who have an understanding of local issues and Aboriginal social structures and who are willing to act in a culturally appropriate way are important to the Mt Theo programme and they can also play a large role in community campaigns to stop sniffing elsewhere.

Moving beyond crisis intervention and responding to broader issues

Today, Mt Theo maintains the capacity to deal quickly and effectively with the occasional outbreak of sniffing, and the programme continues with a broadened focus. Many organisations set up to deal with sniffing cease once the crisis is perceived to have passed, only to have petrol sniffing recur [2,11,22,23]. Mt Theo Program has built upon its success at stopping petrol sniffing.

The challenge now for Mt Theo is to assist young Warlpiri people in creating positive lives, beyond substance misuse. Alcohol and cannabis misuse by young Warlpiri people are major issues. To tackle these, Mt Theo is working with young people in addressing issues underlying substance misuse behaviour, through the Jaru Pirrjirdi (Strong Voices) Project. There is a growing team of youth leaders (including many ex-sniffers) 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 ganja’.

Conclusion

The Mt Theo Program has achieved unique success in stopping petrol sniffing in the remote community of Yuendumu. The key factors involved in the rare

achievements of the Program are its multi-faceted nature, strong community support, the cross-cultural relationships supporting it and an ability to move beyond crisis intervention.

This case study may provide assistance to others interested in addressing petrol sniffing in remote Aboriginal communities. However, it cannot be used as a simple generic blueprint for addressing sniffing. The Program cannot be replicated 'wholesale' as it was developed in a specific context, and is based around particular people and a particular community. (Some would argue nor should this programme be replicated, as it is not uniformly exemplary.) Elements of the Mt Theo Program that have contributed towards its unusual success at stopping petrol sniffing can guide action to address crisis levels of petrol sniffing in remote Aboriginal communities.

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