VOLATILE SUBSTANCE MISUSE (VSM) PREVENTION INITIATIVES IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

A perspective from a frontline service

CONTEXT
Central Australia spans more than 2 million sq kilometers. In the region there are over 50 remote settlements of the Pintubi, Luritja, Warlpiri, Pitjantjatjara, Ngananyu, Yankunytjara, Anmatjere, Alyawarr, Arrernte and Anmatjere peoples. The set accounts are great with some basic services and populations of up to 1000 people. In 2005 it was estimated that there were around 612 people sniffing at various levels in the region and the cost of this in terms of factors like impact on the justice and health systems was estimated at AU$75 million per annum. Substances sniffed were mainly petrol, paint and glue.

The Central Australian Young Link Up Service (CAYLUS) is an Alice Springs based service which works with communities and services to decrease levels of alcohol and drug abuse among young people. In this work we have been integrally involved in the implementation of a variety of VSM Interventions.

SUBSTITUTION OF STANDARD GASOLINE WITH LOW AROMATIC 'OPAL' FUEL

Background: Since 2006, a Low Aromatic Fuel which is commonly known as Opal has been widely available in communities and roadhouses across the Central Australian Region. The Australian Government supports its use through subsidy and promotion programs which aims to comprehensively replace standard unleaded with the fuel in the region.

Results: A sustained 95% drop in levels of petrol sniffing in the region d’Abbs and Shaw (1). Based on data generated by Access Economics (2), this will have led to a (AU)$53.73 million benefit to the community in terms of health and other savings.

OUTSTATION (COMMUNITY) REHAB PROJECTS

Background: At the remote outstations of Ilpurla and Mt Theo local families take volatile substance users in to care and offer an informal treatment/ rehab program. Mt Theo has run for 14 years and Barry Abbott at Ilpurla has done this for more than 30 years. The remote location of both these programs means that clients cannot easily leave the facilities, frontline staff on both programs are Aboriginal people who speak local languages and hold cultural authority. These are the only services like this in the region, they take referrals not only for VSM but also take clients on court orders and informal family referrals. In particular the services are able to take young violent men and clients on mandated treatment orders.

Results: Anecdotal accounts indicate these services are crucial not only in providing treatment to individuals but also providing families and communities with a way to take action when young people are sniffing heavily. The Mt Theo outstation and the associated youth program at Yuendumu led to cessation of sniffing in the community (6). Drug and Alcohol Services in the region identify the services of these outstations as being the only feasible option for many high needs clients (3).

SUBSTITUTION OF REDUCED TOXICITY SPRAY PAINT PRODUCTS FOR AROMATIC SPRAY PAINTS

Background: In 2006 CAYLUS supported retailers in switching to the Low Toxicity versions of selected spray paint products. These products are being produced to improve the safety and environmental impact of these sprays. They have lower amounts of Xylene, Toluene and other Hydrocarbons which means they are less intoxicating when sniffed.

Results: Christina Marel (7) found that the introduction of Low Toxicity Sprays led to a large drop in ‘suspicious sales’ of spray paint as identified by retailers in Alice Springs as well as large drop in overall sales. Anecdotal accounts from youth and drug and alcohol workers in the region suggest a substantial drop in levels of spray paint sniffing due to the measure.

References:

VSM LEGISLATION

Background: In 2005 the Northern Territory Government implemented targeted VSM Legislation (5), the legislation, which is currently examining creating legislation to force retailers to make the fuel available.

Issues: The roll out of the fuel is not comprehensive as some retailers refuse to stock it. d’Abbs and Shaw (1) found that the further standard unleaded fuel is away from a community the greater the reduction in prevalence of sniffing. Following calls from Community agencies and a Senate Inquiry (3) examining the issues, the Commonwealth Government is currently examining creating legislation to force retailers to make the fuel available.

Premium (high octane) Unleaded is still necessary for some vehicles particularly in regional centres and highways. This fuel is intoxicating if sniffed, in a few sites there have been instances of the fuel being sniffed.

The lack of appropriate complimentary measures on the ground such as diversionary and treatment initiatives to engage the youth who had been sniffing. A recent evaluation of the Impact of Low Aromatic Fuel (1) and Senate Inquiry (3) have called for a renewed focus from government on developing such measures.

Low Aromatic Fuel is still dangerous if inhaled, a young man in one community asphyxiated whilst trying to get high off the fuel in 2005. Levels of sniffing related death in the region are far lower though as result of the use of Low Aromatic fuel.

YOUTH AND DIVERSONARY PROGRAMS

Background: There have been a variety of attempts both locally and regionally to provide activity and diversionary programs to engage youth and children in positive alternatives to sniffing and other high risk behaviours. Youth workers in some communities work with local teams to run a regular program of activities as well as providing limited case management and referral support and acting as a point of coordination for visiting youth services.

Results: Youth development and activities, programs based in remote communities have been associated with reduced substance misuse, improved child health and nutrition and better school attendance (4). They are also an effective demand reduction intervention for alcohol, marijuana and other substances. Youth workers have provided a crucial point of response to emerging issues affecting youth wellbeing in remote communities.

Issues: Successful Community development based youth work requires long term commitment and proper resourcing in order to succeed. Such programs don’t provide the short term, high profile gains that are often being sought by government in order to justify the continuations of programs. Youth development work can take on a range of forms depending on the ideas, aspirations and opportunities in particular locations. This sort of work and its outcomes are gradual, meaningful results often only emerge in the context established and long term relationships. These factors coupled with the lack of an adequate physical and administrative infrastructure in the region have meant that these services have not been made available in most communities to compliment the roll out of Low Aromatic fuel. Rather, there has been a reliance on visiting short term services at the cost of community ownership and appropriateness. A recent study examining the results of a government scheme to roll out Low Aromatic Fuel along with youth services found that despite significant funding to do so there had been no coordination between the roll out of Opal Fuel and youth programs (7).