



NPY Women's Council: Advocacy Substance Abuse: Cannabis



“They rob their mothers, grandmothers for marijuana.”

“There are lots of dealers running around everywhere on the APY Lands!”

The issue

The most popular illicit drug across Australia - cannabis - is heavily used in NPY communities, with very severe consequences. While there is no definitive data on cannabis use in the NPY region or Central Australia generally, there is no doubt that it is an enormous problem and consumption has been very much on the increase for a decade or more². Research in three East Arnhem Land communities in the Top End of the NT has documented ‘endemic’ levels of usage, ‘with over 70% of males and 20% of females being current users,’ around twice the consumption of regular cannabis users elsewhere in Australia³. Further, in a five-year follow-up study the ‘great majority’ reported continuing heavy use, indicating more than mere adolescent experimentation⁴.

Aboriginal people are four to five times more likely than other Australians to be hospitalised for mental or behavioural disorders as a result of psychoactive substance misuse⁵. While there is a lack of regional or national data on the connection between cannabis use and mental health disorders and or suicide, research in the East Arnhem Land communities indicates ‘a strong association between heavy cannabis use and moderate - severe depressive symptoms’ with ‘nearly a third of females and one in six males reporting moderate - severe symptoms⁶.

Cannabis use has been of great concern to NPYWC’s members for many years. The vast majority of a sample of Anangu residents interviewed in an individual attitudinal survey in September – October 2009 on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands nominated cannabis as a major problem in their respective communities. Interviewees stated that it leads to depression, psychosis and other mental health problems, suicide, fighting (especially when supplies run out), domestic and family violence and food stealing by hungry, stoned users⁷. NPYWC members and other residents of WA and NT NPY communities regularly put similar views.

Many APY Lands residents who were surveyed also reported that the small township of **Mintabie** on the APY Lands (see Fact Sheet 13) continues to be a common source, and that some Anangu locals were also dealing. Cannabis has most likely outstripped alcohol in terms of the level of use and resulting damage, but there is an absence of data to inform as to whether or not this is the case. No doubt dealers in Central Australia, and further south, including Adelaide and Pt. Augusta, have like those in the Top End, spotted a lucrative, remote market that is difficult to police adequately and where they can charge exorbitant prices to addicted, repeat customers.

Some attribute recent increases to the enormous reduction in petrol sniffing in the region since the introduction of Opal low octane, low aromatic fuel in 2005⁸. While a number of people who previously sniffed have no doubt shifted to cannabis, some would have already used it when available, and there is no empirical evidence to support the argument that the entire former sniffing cohort has moved to it as a matter of course.

Unlike cannabis, ‘sniffable’ petrol was comparatively cheap and easy to buy or steal, and very young people looking for intoxicating substances do not necessarily have the wherewithal to purchase cannabis⁹. Further, cannabis use was already rife by the time Opal was introduced. NPYWC nevertheless lobbied vigorously for the provision of alternative activities for young people its (successful) approaches to Australian Government for the extended subsidisation of Opal fuel¹⁰, recognising the risk of their switching to illicit drug or other inhalants such as paint.

Action

NPYWC through its Youth Program supports diversionary recreation programs for young people as well as offering case management support for those who abuse substances or are at risk of doing so.

It also takes a strong position on education, including compulsory school attendance, and does not run or support diversionary programs during school time. As with alcohol and petrol, however, NPYWC also strenuously promotes supply reduction. Whilst acknowledging that the many back roads in the region make monitoring very difficult, it has after many years of argument helped to persuade governments that adequate policing is essential.

One of the complementary measures¹¹ to the introduction of Opal fuel was the establishment of a Substance Abuse Intelligence Desk (SAID) in Alice Springs in January 2006; another in Katherine NT in February 2009 and a third at Marla SA near the APY Lands in July 2009. The SAID uses sniffer dogs to aid in detection and among other things, gathers intelligence and co-ordinates policing operations in the tri-state region of NT, SA and WA, targeting traffickers of illicit drugs, alcohol and petrol.

Differing definitions of ‘commercial’ and ‘trafficable’ quantities and their application to the different forms of cannabis in the respective jurisdictions can lead to varying consequences on conviction, depending on where the drugs are found. In the NT for example, 50 grams constitutes a trafficable quantity of cannabis plant, whilst in SA it is 250 grams and in WA three kilograms. A commercial quantity of cannabis oil in NT is 25 grams, but in SA it is one kilogram¹².

To July 2010 the SAIDs had seized 106.5 kilograms of cannabis and more than a kilogram of MDMA(ecstasy), amphetamines and other drugs and made more than a thousand arrests¹³. NPYWC supports the work of the SAID in the region and passes on information supplied by community members about drug trafficking and dealing.

References

- 1 Comments from APY Lands residents in an attitudinal survey designed and conducted by NPYWC for Langford Consultants September - October 2009, as part of an Australian Government (FaHCSIA) contract to prepare an AP Y Lands Community Baseline Profile.
- 2 See: *Policing cannabis and other illicit substances in remote Indigenous Australian communities*, McAtamney A and Willis K <http://ncpic.org.au/ncpic/publications/aic-bulletins/article/policing-cannabis-and-other-illicit-substances-in-remote-indigenous-australian-communities>
- 3 *Cannabis use in remote Indigenous communities in Australia: endemic yet neglected*. Lee KSK, Conigrave KM, Patton G and Clough AR, Medical Journal of Australia, 2009; 190 (5) Online at: www.mja.com.au/public/issues/190_05_020309/lee11321_fm.htm
- 4 *Five year longitudinal study of cannabis users in three remote Aboriginal communities in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia*. Lee KSK, Clough AR, Conigrave KM, et al Drug Alcohol Review, 2008. Online at: www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/health-resources/bibliography?lid=15819
- 5 *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health performance framework 2006 report: detailed analyses*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Canberra, 2007. Online at: www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/title/10429
- 6 *Heavy cannabis use and depressive symptoms in three Aboriginal communities in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory*. Lee KSK, Clough AR, Conigrave KM, Jaragba M J, and Patton GC, Medical Journal of Australia , 2008; 188 (10) Online at: www.mja.com.au/public/issues/188_10_190508/lee11413_fm.html#0_i1092135
- 7 See 1 above.
- 8 See for example the UnitingCare Wesley's online e-newsletter which monitors service and policy issues on the APY Lands: www.papertracker.com.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=217&Itemid=1#_edn3
- 9 In the absence of an evidence base, Professor Dennis Gray, Deputy Director at the National Drug Research Institute at Curtin University of Technology, and a leader of the Institute's Aboriginal Research Program, warns against drawing any conclusions of a massive shift without evidence, given the varied social and economic factors. Personal communication.
- 10 See: *Opal Cost Benefit Analysis*, Report by Access Economics, 2006: www.accesseconomics.com.au/publicationsreports/showreport.php?id=2&searchfor=2006&searchby=year
- 11 See joint media release 12th September 2005 by then federal Ministers: Tony Abbott (Health) and Amanda Vanstone (Indigenous Affairs): [www.health.gov.au/internet/ministers/publishing.nsf/Content/3C0988D17EC61672CA25707A007A6D0B/\\$File/abb109.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/ministers/publishing.nsf/Content/3C0988D17EC61672CA25707A007A6D0B/$File/abb109.pdf)
- 12 *Misuse of Drugs Act NT; Controlled Substances Act 1984 (SA) and Misuse of Drugs Act 1981(WA)*
- 13 Figures supplied September 2010 by the Substance Abuse Operations Section Indigenous Programs Branch, Indigenous Programs & Economic Development Group, FaHCSIA.