

## References

- 1 Opal is a low octane, low aromatic fuel developed by BP for the Department of Health and Ageing and introduced in 2005. Opal has very low levels of compounds such as benzene, toluene and xylene, which are associated with the narcotic effects of sniffing petrol. See: [www.bp.com/faq.do?categoryId=9012370&contentId=7024234&currentPage=1](http://www.bp.com/faq.do?categoryId=9012370&contentId=7024234&currentPage=1)
- 2 Janet Inyika is currently an elected Director (2010) and former staff member of NPYWC, and a long-time campaigner against sniffing. Translated by Linda Rive for NPYWC.
- 3 The names Aboriginal people from the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara (Anangu) and Ngaanyatjarra (Yarnangu) language groups use to describe themselves.
- 4 *Facing the Real Problems: Substance Abuse in Aboriginal Communities*, Edwards, W., 2005. Submission to the Senate Community Affairs Committee Inquiry into petrol sniffing in remote Aboriginal communities. Edwards was the Superintendent of the then Ernabella Mission in the far north-west of SA from 1958 to 1972 and also lived at the Fregon (1973) and Amata (1976-80) communities. Online at: [www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac\\_ctte/completed\\_inquiries/2004-07/petrol\\_sniffing/submissions/sub11.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004-07/petrol_sniffing/submissions/sub11.pdf) Maggie Brady has reported sporadic use in Central Australia as long ago as the 1940s: *Heavy Metal: The Social Meaning of Petrol Sniffing in Australia*, Brady M., Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra 1992.
- 5 *An Evaluation of the Comgas Scheme*, Report prepared for the Comgas Evaluation working Group: Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Council SA (Inc.) (ADAC.) Shaw G. et al, Department of Health and Ageing, 2004. Online at: [www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-oatsih-pspp-comgas](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-oatsih-pspp-comgas) For many years deaths were routinely recorded as being due to i.e. respiratory failure, without reference to the person's sniffing habit.
- 6 For extensive analysis of the economic and social cost of petrol sniffing see: *Opal Cost Benefit Analysis*, Report by Access Economics, 2006: [www.accesseconomics.com.au/publicationsreports/showreport.php?id=2&searchfor=2006&searchby=year](http://www.accesseconomics.com.au/publicationsreports/showreport.php?id=2&searchfor=2006&searchby=year);
- 7 The primary health care service on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands in SA. Nganampa Health Council Inc. took over the provision of health services in 1985.
- 8 *Survey of prevalence of petrol sniffing on Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands*, Nganampa Health Council Inc., November 2008
- 9 *Data Collection for the Petrol Sniffing Prevention Program* (summary), d'Abbs P and Shaw G. A report for the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, James Cook University, 2007. [www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/91FFB14D0B9BAD9ECA25750700794A40/\\$File/Data%20collection%20report%20summary.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/91FFB14D0B9BAD9ECA25750700794A40/$File/Data%20collection%20report%20summary.pdf) As the authors note, during this time different communities switched to using Opal at different times, and some had previously been supplying Comgas (subsidised Avgas) as an alternative to regular unleaded petrol.
- 10 *Review of Volatile Substance Use Among Indigenous People*, Midford R, Maclean S, Catto M, Debuyst O. Australian Indigenous Health InfoNet. 2010. See: [www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/volatile\\_review](http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/volatile_review)
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- 12 *The delivery of services to people with disabilities on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands – an Anangu perspective*. Tregenza J, Kutjara Consultants. Review for the Country and Disability Services Division, Department of Human Services SA., January 2002. Also see the SA Coroner's findings in the inquest into the deaths of petrol sniffers Ken, Hunt and Thompson (all dec.) 2002. Online at: [www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/index.html](http://www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/index.html)
- 13 All three have severe behavioural disorders from sniffing. One spent many years in prison in WA despite having no conviction as he was not fit to plead. Attempts to have him return to his community were unsuccessful, and he is awaiting supported accommodation in Perth. The other two are able to have occasional, supervised visits home.
- 14 *Responding to petrol sniffing on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands: A case study* Chapter 4: Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Report 2003, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (now the Australian Human Rights Commission) 2003. Online at: [www.hreoc.gov.au/ocial\\_justice/sj\\_report/sjreport03/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/ocial_justice/sj_report/sjreport03/index.html)
- 15 *Other drugs, other people, other places: the policy response to Indigenous petrol sniffing in Australia*, d'Abbs, P. and Brady, M., Conference paper, Inhalant Use and Disorder Conference, Australian Institute of Criminology, Townsville, July 2003
- 16 See Ref. 5.
- 17 See the SA Coroner's findings 2002 noted at Ref. 12 above at: [www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/index.html](http://www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/index.html) and: *Documentation of NPY Women's Council (Aboriginal Corporation) petrol sniffing project at Kaltjiti (Fregon) Community, AP Lands, SA*. Shaw, G., NPY Women's Council, 2002.
- 18 [www.abc.net.au/lateline/includes/lateline\\_20060601.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/includes/lateline_20060601.htm)
- 19 See the SA Coroner's findings 2002 at: [www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/index.html](http://www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/index.html)
- 20 See the SA Coroner's 2005 findings in Ken, Ward, Ryan and Cooper (all dec.) at: [www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/index.html](http://www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/index.html)
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- 25 [www.health.nt.gov.au/Service\\_Locator/Withdrawal\\_Services/index.aspx](http://www.health.nt.gov.au/Service_Locator/Withdrawal_Services/index.aspx)
- 26 See Ref. 5.
- 27 The Central Australian Youth Link-up Service, an advocacy and substance misuse intervention service based in Alice Springs and working mainly in the central NT are: [www.tangentyere.org.au/services/family\\_youth/caylus/](http://www.tangentyere.org.au/services/family_youth/caylus/)
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- 29 See Ref. 6: Map of proposed roll-out area at i of *Opal Cost Benefit Analysis*, Report by Access Economics, 2006: [www.accesseconomics.com.au/publicationsreports/showreport.php?id=2&searchfor=2006&searchby=year](http://www.accesseconomics.com.au/publicationsreports/showreport.php?id=2&searchfor=2006&searchby=year)
- 30 *Grasping the opportunity of Opal: assessing the impact of the Petrol Sniffing Strategy*: report of the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, Canberra, March 2009. Online at: [www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac\\_ctte/petrol\\_sniffing\\_substance\\_abuse08/report/report.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/petrol_sniffing_substance_abuse08/report/report.pdf) and also see: [www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-oatsih-pspp-about](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-oatsih-pspp-about)
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- 32 See Ref. 8.
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- 34 *Cost Benefit Analysis of Legislation to Mandate the Supply of Opal Fuel in Regions of Australia*. South Australian Centre for Economic Studies for the Department of Health and Ageing, January 2010

### Further reading:

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*Dog Ear Café: How the Mt Theo Program Beat the Curse of Petrol Sniffing*, Stojanovski, A., Hybrid, Ormond, Victoria, 2010.



# NPY Women's Council: Advocacy Substance Abuse: Petrol



*"These petrol sniffers are our own flesh and blood, yet we have lost them all to petrol... Of course we know that some petrol sniffers cannot be helped. They will live their lives in wheelchairs with acquired brain injuries. But for the new recruits... well we are hoping that with Opal there will be no new recruits to petrol sniffing."* Janet Inyika, NPY Women's Council, launching Opal fuel<sup>1</sup> with then Health Minister Tony Abbott, February 2005<sup>2</sup>.

## The Issue

Petrol sniffing has without doubt been one of the biggest challenges to Anangu and Yarnangu<sup>3</sup> in the NPY region, to NPYWC and to other Aboriginal people from central and more northern communities. It has destroyed families, devastated communities and resulted in many early and unnecessary deaths. NPYWC has been a significant participant in the struggle to overcome petrol sniffing. This has taken place on a number of levels: legal, bureaucratic, political, policy and research, and in the media.

The use of petrol as an inhalant was "first observed in the [NPY] region in 1968 when people returned from ceremonies at Warburton Mission in Western Australia and a few young men had brought back the practice with them [to South Australia<sup>4</sup>]."

From the 1970s increasing numbers of young people in NPY communities and in other central and northern remote parts of Australia used petrol, initially boys and young men and later girls and young women. Leaded petrol was sniffed prior to its replacement by unleaded fuel, which was phased in from the mid-1980s to early 2002 - with disastrous effects from both the lead and hydrocarbons such as toluene and benzene, which are also present in regular unleaded petrol (ULP).

These volatile hydrocarbons are quickly absorbed, crossing the blood-brain barrier and affecting the brain cortex, cerebellum, and brain stem, depressing the central nervous system. Damage may be irreversible. Sniffing petrol caused the deaths of at least 32 people in the central region between 1998 and 2003<sup>5</sup>, and probably hundreds from the 1970s to the mid-2000s<sup>6</sup>.

Statistics have not always been collected routinely or consistently across the NPY region. Since 1984 Nganampa Health<sup>7</sup> however has conducted regular surveys of sniffing on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands SA, where the population is around two and a half thousand. In 1993 its research showed a sniffing cohort of 178 or 8.4% of the total population; in 2000, 166 or 6.2%; and in 2004, 222 or 8.4%<sup>8</sup>. Data collected for the Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA) shows that between November 2005 and November 2006, 145 people or 13.9% of those aged from 5 to 40 years on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands were sniffing petrol<sup>9</sup>.

## Effects

In the short term, the effects can include: euphoria, hallucinations, aggression, disinhibition (including sexual, leading to high STI rates), blurred vision and confusion. In the longer term, chronic headache, cognitive deterioration, ataxia (gross lack of co-ordination of muscle movements), low energy, angina, mood swings and depression are common. Sniffing can and has led to death through: heart failure, respiratory failure, burns, wandering off, suicide, homicide and motor vehicle accidents<sup>10</sup>.

Sniffers may be violent. They often become alienated or ostracised from family and community, are disruptive, promiscuous, and do not attend school or work. Chronic users are likely to experience hangover effects and withdrawal symptoms when not sniffing. Many suffer irreversible neurological damage, leading to cognitive impairment, heart, lung and liver damage. The practice is psychologically rather than physically addictive and does not have the same withdrawal patterns as opiates or alcohol<sup>11</sup>. By 2002, sniffing was the main cause of Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) on the APY Lands, making it the single most prevalent cause of disability<sup>12</sup>.

NPYWC assists those who have ABI and or physical disabilities as a result of sniffing. Some thirty or so continue to live with their families, and they and their carers obtain disability support and respite assistance through NPYWC services. Others, including two brothers who are wheelchair-bound, live in supported accommodation in Alice Springs, while another three men are in a mental health hospital in Perth<sup>13</sup>.

## Causes

Numerous reasons have been proffered as to why young people sniff petrol. These include: boredom; parental neglect; family dysfunction and breakdown; feelings of hopelessness; poverty; youth experimentation; the easy availability of petrol; thrill-seeking and a misguided assertion of autonomy; peer or 'gang' culture; traditional regional child-rearing practices that preclude strong discipline coupled with a general cultural reluctance to tell others how to behave; and low educational attainment.

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Background artwork by Rene Kulitja. 'Three sides of NPY' 2009.



Certainly in many communities ringleaders have influenced others, often younger people, in their sniffing habit and it is often done in groups. Whatever the underlying causes, the results for individuals, families and communities have been devastating.

#### Action

Almost from the organisation's beginning, NPYWC's members sought external help to combat this insidious and destructive habit, which seemed most of the time to be beyond the control of families. They became increasingly desperate to stop a practice that was killing or disabling their children and grandchildren. Government responses were sometimes piecemeal and short-term, seeking solutions from communities that they were incapable of providing<sup>14</sup>. As two leading researchers in the field put it: "How, one must ask, can communities said to be wracked by disempowerment and social deterioration be expected to 'originate and control' actions in response to petrol sniffing?"<sup>15</sup>

#### Avgas

In 1998 the Australian Government offered a subsidy to communities to use Avgas - aviation fuel - instead of petrol as a preventative measure, renamed 'Comgas' for this purpose. Whilst Avgas contains lead, it has low levels of aromatic hydrocarbons, is unpleasant to sniff and tends to induce illness rather than intoxication. It was taken up, at different times, by 33 communities, some within the NPY cross-border region. A number declined to use it, or stopped using it, because after a while it caused damage to vehicle engines. Other communities continued to sell unleaded petrol to tourists, but not to locals.

Some who had rejected (or abandoned) the Comgas Scheme took it on after petrol sniffing deaths occurred. It was more effective - at least for a time - in areas such as the Ngaanyatjarra Lands in WA, where regional governance was relatively cohesive, than, for example, the APY Lands, where it was not. It was not sold in roadhouses. Overall the Scheme was useful, but one of several factors that limited its effectiveness was the proximity of ULP, in communities themselves or at petrol stations and roadhouses<sup>16</sup>.

#### Youth work

In 1999, in an attempt to reduce sniffing, NPYWC began its first youth service - the Young People's Project - at Fregon (Kaltjiti) SA. Success was limited for reasons including: a lack of staff housing; high levels of violence due to sniffing; and the extreme difficulty in engaging chronic sniffers in other activities<sup>17</sup>. This was nevertheless the beginning of NPYWC's efforts to offer positive alternatives to young people, based on a model of consistent, safe, high quality services. NPYWC has worked determinedly for the establishment of essential infrastructure such as recreational facilities and staff housing. It currently runs successful youth programs in the region (see Fact Sheet 10.)

#### Media

In 2001 and 2002 petrol sniffing and its horrific consequent damage were brought vividly to public attention through several articles written by *The Australian's* Paul Toohey. NPYWC helped to arrange interviews with affected families for some of the stories. Toohey won a Walkley Award for the series. NPYWC has continued to use the media strategically to highlight this and other substance abuse issues, including the practice of men exchanging petrol for sexual favours<sup>18</sup>.

#### Inquests

In 2001 NPYWC assisted the families of three deceased chronic petrol sniffers, aged 27, 25 and 29 years, to seek a coronial inquest into the deaths. All had died as a result of inhaling petrol fumes after taking a can of petrol to bed. NPYWC was separately represented at the inquest held at Umuwa SA in mid-2002, and members and staff were among those who gave evidence. Coroner Wayne Chivell was critical of the lack of government co-ordination on the issue, and that he regarded as excessive time spent gathering information rather than taking action.

His recommendations included: an increased police presence on the APY Lands, an urgent improvement in disability services and secure facilities for 'detention, detoxification, treatment and rehabilitation.' He commented that "Governments should not approach the task on the basis that the solutions must come from Anangu communities alone" and "the wider Australian community has a responsibility to assist Anangu to address the problem of petrol sniffing"<sup>19</sup>.

In late 2004 the Coroner returned to investigate four more deaths of people who had been petrol sniffers: three suicides by hanging and one of an intellectually disabled former sniffer who had wandered off from his home. Again NPYWC was separately represented, giving evidence, among other things, on the difficulty of dealing with sometimes obstructive government agencies, including in the areas of youth and disability services. Mr. Chivell found that since his 2002 findings, the problem of petrol sniffing had become worse, and that with the exception of SAPOL, the SA police service, agencies had not acted on his earlier recommendations.

He re-stated these, adding others about the need for improved youth and disability services, and the need for the use of Opal fuel (by then available to communities) to continue. Critical of slow-moving committees established by government, he said, "There is no need for further information gathering, and there is a vast untapped pool of professional expertise to be utilised. What is missing is prompt, forthright, properly planned, properly funded action"<sup>20</sup>.

In 2005 the NT Coroner Greg Cavanagh inquired into the deaths of three males, one a child of fourteen from the Willowra community and two from Mutitjulu, all of whom died from inhaling petrol fumes. NPYWC gave evidence at the Coroner's request. Mr. Cavanagh re-iterated and added to the SA Coroner's recommendations, endorsing Mr. Chivell's view "That such conditions should exist among a group of people defined by race in the twenty-first century in a developed nation like Australia is a disgrace and should shame us all." He also recommended the further 'roll out' of Opal fuel<sup>21</sup>.

#### Treatment and rehabilitation

In 2004, following the 2002 coronial findings, the SA Government announced that it would build a substance misuse treatment facility, with the Australian Government to fund capital costs and SA to manage it and pay for operations. A long consultation period and construction delays ensued and it did not open until 2008. It is located at Amata on the APY Lands. A previous SA Health Minister had promised in 1986 to build a treatment centre for petrol sniffers within twelve months<sup>22</sup>. In 1998 the NT Coroner Warren Donald had recommended that "the Commonwealth establish and fund rehabilitation facilities for chronic petrol sniffers in Alice Springs"<sup>23</sup>.

NPYWC was critical of the eventual decision to locate the facility on the APY Lands due to anticipated recruitment problems, and because it would accept only SA residents. Attendance is voluntary unless ordered by a court, and the lack of a twenty-four hour supervised residential program has meant that magistrates are reluctant to refer offenders with substance abuse problems. By the time it opened, there were very few sniffers, thanks to Opal fuel, although there is no shortage of cannabis users and problem drinkers.

Just eleven clients stayed there during the first two years - from July 2008 to the end of June 2010. Due to concerns about this low level of use, the Australian Government is to undertake 'a scoping study to explore options for optimising [the facility's] usage'<sup>24</sup>. The NT Government has in recent years funded additional treatment places in Alice Springs for adults and juveniles affected by volatile and other substances<sup>25</sup>, not restricted only to those who live in the NT.

#### Opal fuel - supply reduction

By the time the *Evaluation of the Comgas Scheme*<sup>26</sup> was released in late 2004, BP, contracted by DoHA, had formulated Opal, the low aromatic substitute for regular ULP that does not have an intoxicating effect. Opal was initially made available to Aboriginal communities that had been on the Comgas Scheme. More costly to refine than other ULP, Opal is subsidised by the Australian Government. NPYWC began lobbying for its implementation over a wider area and also to numerous non-community based retail outlets, in order to reduce the proximity to regular ULP. In 2005 NPYWC, CAYLUS<sup>27</sup> and General Property Trust (GPT), owner of Voyages hotels and resorts, including at Yulara near Uluru, formed the **Opal Alliance**.

In 2005 then Health Minister Tony Abbott and Indigenous Affairs Minister Amanda Vanstone announced an extension of the subsidy to provide Opal to the Yulara resort petrol station and to several roadhouses in the southern NT. Unlike Yulara, some did not immediately take it up, mainly due to a combination of bad publicity and distribution and bowser suitability issues.

Ministers Abbott and Vanstone also announced a joint Australian, WA, SA and NT Government approach to the issue, comprising 'an 8-point plan':

- consistent legislation - the NT, SA and WA governments are making it an offence to sell or supply volatile substances for sniffing;
- appropriate levels of policing - including zero tolerance for traffickers ;
- further roll-out of non-sniffable petrol;
- alternative activities for young people;
- treatment and respite facilities;
- communication and education strategies;
- strengthening and supporting communities - to become real partners in solving the problem; and
- evaluation.

Not all aspects have been fully implemented.

The **Opal Alliance** wanted further supply reduction through an extended subsidy that would include Alice Springs and other regional towns. It commissioned Access Economics to do a cost benefit analysis, launched in Sydney in March 2006<sup>28</sup>.

The **Alliance** proposed a wide Opal coverage area across the NT, WA and SA. Access Economics estimated the total cost of sniffing<sup>29</sup> in this Rollout Region in 2005 at \$78.9 million.

It calculated that with the fuel subsidy and supporting strategies including youth programs and additional policing, the total cost of the Rollout - based on a 75% reduction in sniffing - would be \$26.6 million, with a \$27.1 million net gain if health and life improvements were included, and a (modest) cost of \$1.5 million if they were omitted.

In July 2006, after more lobbying by the **Opal Alliance**, Minister Abbott agreed to extend the Opal fuel subsidy to all Alice Springs petrol stations, in addition to Aboriginal communities and roadhouses in Central Australia. This also saw some resistance and delays, but eventually Opal replaced regular ULP. Premium is still sold. By March 2009, under what is now the Petrol Sniffing Prevention Program, there were around 120 communities and commercial retail outlets providing Opal fuel across Australia<sup>30</sup>.

Petrol sniffing has declined radically in the NPY region and in many other communities that stock subsidised Opal<sup>31</sup>. The 2008 Nganampa Health APY Lands prevalence survey found that in the eighteen months since the previous survey, there were 22 people who had sniffed, from three communities only, with ten of those in one community<sup>32</sup>.

There have unfortunately been persistent outbreaks of sniffing on the western side of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, with the petrol often coming from small towns like Laverton to the south. It is anticipated that the long-awaited installation of an Opal storage tank in Kalgoorlie in late 2010 will assist, provided the relevant retailers all agree to stock Opal. CAYLUS and NPYWC continue to work to address occurrences in their respective regions (including Alice Springs for CAYLUS) and to reduce the availability of alternatives such as glue and paint; there is however no evidence of a significant shift to these alternative inhalants.

While it is an offence to supply petrol for the purpose of sniffing, there is to date no legislation in the NT, SA or WA that prevents the transport of regular unleaded petrol into remote areas. Some NT communities have made local 'management plans' to prohibit the entry of volatile substances under the Territory's *Volatile Substance Abuse Prevention Act*.

NPYWC has argued for the mandatory use of Opal, as the resistance of some retailers allows opportunities for sniffing that could be removed with relative ease. The Senate Community Affairs Committee has also recommended legislation if there is continued non-acceptance<sup>33</sup> and a report commissioned by DoHA in 2009 canvasses the legislative options<sup>34</sup>.

In June 2007, at the National Drug and Alcohol Awards, the **Opal Alliance** won the **Prime Minister's Award for Excellence** in prevention, for its success in achieving the widespread implementation of Opal. NPYWC members are hopeful that this battle has been won, but they know that constant vigilance is essential and that Opal fuel and the supporting strategies must be put in place across the proposed Rollout Region to ensure maximum supply reduction.