Preface to Petrol Sniffing in Aboriginal Communities

Since we completed this review in 2000 petrol sniffing and other forms of inhalant use continue to incite concern, alarm and sadness in the communities where young people use these substances. Looking back four years later, it is clear that too much has remained the same. But there have been some new developments, the ongoing impact of which remains to be determined.

Briefly, in February 2000 the Prime Minister announced an allocation of one million dollars to combat petrol sniffing in the NT, and this has provided (albeit yet again time-limited) funding for some new initiatives. These were to be evaluated in 2004. Also in 2000 the Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Council (ADAC) of South Australia published its extremely successful resource kit Petrol Sniffing and Other Solvents (Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Council (SA) Inc. 2000). More recently, the Commonwealth Government has commissioned a review of the so-called Comgas program, under which remote communities receive subsidies to enable them to substitute petrol with aviation fuel. As of May 2004 the review had not been released. Meanwhile the Australian government has phased out the use of leaded petrol nationally, for environmental reasons. While little is known about the health effects of inhaling lead replacement fuel, clear evidence of morbidity and mortality resulting from ingestion of lead in leaded petrol cited in the review suggests that this is a positive step. (Since publication of our review, Cairney et al have published a useful overview of the neurobiological effects of inhaling petrol (Cairney, Maruff et al. 2002). Despite these developments, Indigenous communities have continued to lose young people as a result of petrol sniffing, prompting further coronial inquiries - and trenchant criticism of government inaction (Chivell 2002).

The last few years have also been marked by increased concern on the part of service providers, governments and the media regarding inhalant use by young people in urban settings. While data is sparse, it is clear that urban inhalant misuse differs from patterns on remote Indigenous communities in at least two key respects: firstly, non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous youths are involved; secondly, inhalants other than petrol are often preferred. In particular, chroming (inhalation of aerosol spray paints) has become the inhalant of choice in many places, while use of a range of other substances including glue and butane is also reported. (One of the booklets in the ADAC kit referred to above deals specifically with forms of inhalant use other than petrol sniffing). As with petrol sniffing, chroming provides a powerful intoxicating and sometimes hallucinatory experience (MacLean 2003). Neither the immediate pharmacological affects of chroming nor longer-term outcomes are well understood. Issues pertaining to access of these products differ somewhat from those relating to petrol sniffing, as paints, glues and butane are sold through a wide range of retail outlets. This suggests a different range of community responses to supply restriction.

As with petrol sniffing, urban inhalant use generates more than its share of sensational reporting. Early in 2002 a media-fanned controversy about ‘supervised chroming’ in Victoria focused public attention on responses to inhalant use by young people in state care, and led the Victorian Government to banning this form of harm minimisation. In the same year, a Victorian Parliamentary Committee conducted and published a comprehensive review of the nature and consequences of volatile substance use, and of strategies for dealing with it (Parliament of Victoria Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee 2002). The Committee’s report, which can be downloaded from the web, is a particularly useful resource on the broader range of volatile substance-related problems (http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/dcpc/previous_inquiries/volatile_substances/volatile_substances.htm). In response to the growing concern with volatile substance misuse in Australia, the Australian Institute of Criminology in July 2003 convened the first national conference on inhalant use, in Townsville, Queensland. Presentations to this conference can also be accessed from the AIC website (http://www.aic.gov.au/conferences/2003-inhalant/).

Pressures to boost police capacity to respond effectively to volatile substance misuse have led two Australian States – Victoria and Queensland – to introduce legislation empowering police to apprehend (without arresting) persons believed to be engaging in inhalant use and remove them to a ‘safe place’. In the case of Queensland, the new powers, introduced in mid 2004, are to be evaluated over their first 12 months of operation.
Reflecting the available literature at the time we wrote it, our review of petrol sniffing-related interventions focuses primarily on use in remote Indigenous communities rather than towns or cities. It has since become clear that inhalant use by young people can no longer be conceived of as purely an ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘remote’ phenomenon. While this is providing enormous challenges and difficulties for non-Indigenous people we hope that it may serve to reduce the stigma around use of these drugs in Indigenous communities. In the meantime, and despite the new forms and settings associated with inhalant misuse, we believe that much of our review remains current and relevant to the range of inhalants young people – especially Indigenous people - are now using.

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References


