

**INHALANT ABUSE IN AUSTRALIA:
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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Dedication

This presentation is dedicated to Jan Oswald (nee Sultan), John Oswald (deceased) and Ellen Rakovsky. It is also offered by way of remembrance of Sean Oswald and Greg Rakovsky (both deceased) and the many other young men and women who have died as a result of the substance abuse.

In 1984, Jan Oswald's son Sean died of solvent abuse. He sniffed a product called *Skefron* and died during his second sniffing experiment. *Skefron*, now off the market, was 100% chloro-fluro-carbon. It was known as "the magic spray" as it produced an "instant ice" feeling when sprayed on sprains and other sports injuries. Jan, with her husband John (deceased) formed SOS (Save Our Sons) and with a network of other parents of deceased and damaged young persons, lobbied the government for product bans, better labelling and public education. Jan gained the support of the Australian Consumers Association, where her concerns found common cause with the organisation's existing hazardous products campaign.

As a result of Jan's persistence, Senator Kilgarrif (now deceased) established a Senate Inquiry. Many of its' findings were never implemented although some gains were made in the areas of product labelling and public education. The results of the campaign work of SOS can still be seen on the label of correction fluid and thinners (*Deliberate Concentration and Inhalation of this product.... may harm or kill you* etc). Twenty years later, inhalant abuse is still a public health issue and much remains to be done.

This presentation consisted in the main of four video clips, which illustrated various aspects of the 1980s solvent abuse issue and the prevention campaign run by SOS. It aims to contribute to the current discussion by providing a historical perspective on this under-recognised drug problem.

Video Clips

"Glue Sniffing", Channel 7 Morning Television Show "11AM", 26/8/83

Themes:

- Availability of hazardous products to young people
- Use of *shock tactics* in counselling

This video clip was part of a segment on national morning television. It introduced the topic of solvent abuse by showing how a popular sports pain relief spray was being sold over the counter to young people, and advertised as suitable for use by young sportspersons, regardless of age. When Jan Oswald saw the advertisement for the product, she was shocked since her research had shown that the product had already been linked to the deaths of 7 young persons and had been recommended for restrictions prior to that time. The video also shows Jan counselling a young person, using shock tactics to bring the point home about the real risks of sniffing which were death or severe injury to the nervous system.

Terry Willessee Tonight - Circa 1983

Themes:

- Use of popular TV drama to publicise health issues
- A mother's perspective

This video clip is part of a segment screened as part of a popular nightly TV program. It began with a segment from *A Country Practice* where sniffing themes were explored and the health risks to young people clearly demonstrated. After the screening, Jan Oswald was interviewed and calmly spoke of her own feelings following the death of Sean. Jan's sense of guilt and loss, her anger at a timid bureaucracy and the continued availability of solvents to young people were her main points. Prevention is not well enough funded she stated; "knowing your own child" and being "honest with children about drugs" were her main messages

The Mike Walsh Show - Circa 1984

Themes:

- Three mothers relate their experiences of solvent abuse by their children
- Symptoms of solvent addiction
- Take a slice of the pie of responsibility

In this footage, Mike Walsh interviewed with three mothers during the height of the Stamp Out Sniffing Campaign. The topics covered included regulation and education, the knowledge base of professionals, producer responsibility and rehabilitation. The avoidance of direct information about the effects of solvent abuse were a major concern to these women, following an incident at a hospital where a petrol sniffer was counselled but without any mention of solvent abuse as a drug issue

Australian Consumers Association, 1984

Themes:

- Solvent abuse as a transition drug
- The link between sniffing and juvenile crime
- The policy of silence

This footage is part of the Australian Consumers Association's submission to the Senate Inquiry into Solvent Abuse. Jan Oswald was instrumental in getting this inquiry off the ground and with the support of the ACA, was able to ensure that a good range of topics were covered. She was interviewed by ACA staffer Jan Neary, at that time a well-known advocate of consumer rights and highly supportive of the Association's hazardous products campaign. A critical point for Jan Oswald was not only the very young age of sniffers, generally, but also the fact that sniffing was often playing the role of a transitional drug to heroin and other dangerous drugs of addiction. The NHMRC Report by Professor Roland Thorpe was mentioned. This report looked into deaths caused by the product "Skefron" between 1975 and 1979. Jan Oswald noted that "Skefron" became a S3 drug 7 years after the first known fatality. Labelling issues were also important and she highlighted the different approaches to labelling taken by different stakeholders in the solvent abuse debate at that time.