

**VOLATILE SUBSTANCES
(TIME FOR POLICY MAKERS TO
TAKE A DEEP BREATH)**

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Thank you for inviting me to speak at this conference – as far as I am aware this is one of the first national conferences to specifically discuss issues related to inhalants – certainly it is an issue that deserves to be targeted.

- I want to begin by firstly acknowledging the work of two of the speakers who will be presenting after me – Maggie Brady’s review “Heavy Metal: The Social Meaning of Petrol Sniffing in Australia”. Also, Peter d’Abbs – along with Sarah McLean – produced a report “Petrol Sniffing in Aboriginal Communities: A review of Interventions” which was released in 2000. Both of these reports have been referred to by many others in the field and are important documents in our understanding of petrol sniffing, but which are also relevant to other volatile substance use.
- At this point I would like to highlight the fact that throughout my paper, I will refer mainly to volatile substance misuse – a broader term which in my view encompasses a wide range of substances that are inhaled.
- Whilst volatile substances (paint, glue, petrol, solvents, etc) are not just used by Indigenous people, Indigenous communities have been experiencing specific problems in this area, particularly with petrol.
- Indeed, Maggie Brady’s report notes that petrol sniffing was first documented in 1950. Although petrol sniffing was recognized as a far more significant problem in the 1970’s. Whilst the problem has continued to today with sporadic outbreaks in various communities, thankfully since that time we have also seen many Indigenous communities acknowledge and act upon the problem.
- More recently, the ANCD commissioned Dennis Gray and others at NDRI to conduct a “mapping exercise” of Indigenous drug and alcohol projects. The report outlined those services operating between 1999 and 2000 and covered funded and non-funded efforts to reduce drug and alcohol harm within Indigenous communities. This report described a number of initiatives – such as the Mt Theo Petrol Sniffer program (since 1994), the Petrol Link-Up Project’s “Brain Story” flip chart (education tool designed to explain the effects of sniffing), the Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Council (ADAC)’s 4 Book “Petrol Sniffing and Other Solvents” manuals aimed at community intervention.
- It is worth noting that the second stage of this project is almost complete and it will focus examples of best practice that are occurring in Indigenous communities regarding drug and alcohol issues. It is hoped that these services will be able to act as best practice models for other services and communities throughout Australia.
- Although everyone would agree there is still much to do, Indigenous communities ought to be congratulated – and supported – in their innovative and determined efforts to tackle this problem.
- In more recent times we have seen a realisation that volatile substance use is not restricted to rural or remote communities, in fact when we move to urban communities we also see the use of many volatile substances (such as glue and paint). In particular, a high profile situation was extensively covered in the media in relation to chroming by adolescents in a drug and alcohol service - the Berry Street Clinic.
- The Berry Street Clinic example produced intense discussion and brought attention to the fact that chroming is a significant problem in Australia – a situation that is certainly not confined to the sniffing of petrol in Indigenous communities and a problem which many drug and alcohol services feel poorly equipped to deal with.

- Indeed the Berry Street Clinic episode raises some real ethical issues for us all. I sympathise greatly with drug and alcohol workers confronted with 12 and 13 year old children wanting to inhale volatile substances. Personally, I know I could not stand there and supervise someone inflicting such damage upon themselves but I also realise that in many cases these same children have been so hurt and damaged in their lives already that it may not be possible to stop them from chroming.
- The thought that they could run away and engage in chroming in environments where others could cruelly take advantage of them or where they could themselves inflict some type of permanent damage upon themselves due to a lack of medical treatment is also something I could not accept. This dilemma is truly confronting and requires considered compassion and understanding on all sides. Pointing accusatory fingers at the workers or the kids, or even the politicians may be easy enough but coming up with a suitable solution is not so easy.
- One of the most concerning aspects of the abuse of volatile substances is that young people – mostly aged between 10 and 20 – are the group who are almost exclusively engaging in this very dangerous activity.
- A cliché that particularly applies to the importance of our efforts in reducing and preventing volatile substance use is that young people are the future and we should do all we can to protect the future of all people in this country.
- For many Indigenous communities who have experienced episodes (or more sustained periods) of sniffing, these young people are becoming disabled in body and mind and causing great disruption in the small communities. One of the themes which comes through in the resources aimed at intervening in sniffing within these communities is that sniffers forget their stories. In both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, this message refers to the problem of disconnectedness among young people.
- Studies have sought to understand why these young people sniff / chrome. Common reasons are given – such as they feel bored, they want to escape and ‘feel good’ and they aren’t being listened to / taken notice of by elders or others in the community from whom they want respect.
- Of course, these feelings are not unique to the situation of those who choose to sniff or chrome. They are a similar sub-set of reasons for a significant amount of drug use in Australia.
- The 2001 AIHW Household Survey figures show that the vast majority of drug use is occurring in the age groups 15 to 29 years of age. I don’t think that it is purely coincidental that this is a significant time of change in a person’s life – more pressures in school (or a struggle to remain in school for some), the search for employment, the challenges associated with young adulthood and eking out their own path and goals in life.
- A significant body of work has been conducted into the life course and the successful or unsuccessful negotiation of a number of transition points. In summary, people are often most at risk of drug use or other problem behaviours at times of great change or transition.
- The ANCD’s “Structural Determinants of Youth Drug Use” report touches on these issues, as do many other reports – including Ross Hommel’s “Pathways to Prevention” report which actually focuses less on drug use and more on crime prevention.
- I raise these matters in this forum for two reasons.
- Firstly – there are many people scattered around this room with far more expertise than I have on the particular issue of volatile substance misuse. I certainly look forward to learning more from them on the specifics of the problem.

- The second reason I raise these broader issues is that whilst I believe volatile substance misuse is a significant and important problem, to some extent, I believe it does not matter what the drug or substance is we are talking about.
- I say this because I believe with any substance misuse; the human element is of the greatest importance. I have often said that Australia has people problems rather than drug problems – and I know that the other members of the Australian National Council on Drugs (which I am lucky enough to chair) agree with me on this point.
- For this reason, I am particularly interested in the development of a national prevention agenda.
- As some of you may be aware, the Inter-Governmental Committee on Drugs is overseeing the development of a prevention agenda or strategy, as well as a world-class monograph which will provide an absolutely comprehensive discussion of prevention.
- I'm pleased to say that the policy document – which has been the subject of a round of consultations in recent times – views prevention broadly. Of course this broad view should not deter us from achieving a more specific purpose, that is, the prevention of the initial uptake of drug use and the prevention of further harms arising from drug use.
- Of course many of you know my views on many aspects of drug policy but I want to take this opportunity to re-state what I firmly believe in this field, and that is the things that we agree on by far and away outnumber the things we disagree on. I think the prevention agenda has the potential to put this view and through this document, there is a possibility for policy unity in the drug and alcohol sector – something I'm sure we all would support.
- Let me draw together some of the points I've made here today and re-focus on the topic.
- I believe that the drug and alcohol sector can look towards the innovative efforts from the Indigenous community in relation to volatile substance use. Certainly there is a need for further attention on this issue within urban settings – which includes some consideration of what this means for drug and alcohol services.
- We also need long-term, sustained approaches to the issue of volatile substances, as with all drug and alcohol issues. Interventions which continually attract pilot funding only often means that the communities and the drug and alcohol sector is unable to build and maintain the capacity to deal effectively with these types of problems. Inhaling and chroming programs are particularly susceptible to this type of short-sightedness.
- Fundamental to our efforts should be a recognition that the human problems which underlie substance use need to be addressed along with the substance use itself.
- Our prevention efforts ought to be focussed towards supporting families and young children such that their chances are enhanced through these difficult transition periods in life.
- 'Resilience building' is becoming a popular term in our field and I believe it is a good term, as it reflects the need for effort across a diverse range of sectors. These sectors include education, health, welfare – in fact any portfolio which has an impact on the way families and children live and the environments in which they grow up in.
- This is why I've titled my paper "Time for policy makers to take a deep breath". I think the drug and alcohol sector (along with others) have strongly demonstrated the point that drug problems are the responsibility of the government – not just the health department – but all government departments.
- I am proud to say that the ANCD has worked with the federal government on its Tough on Drugs Strategy – there is much I could talk about in relation to the achievements under this strategy. Whilst the Prime Minister in this sense has lead from the front, there is still much to be done in the portfolios and departments which form the backbone of our Nation's

governance. There is still much to be done to ensure that we have a truly 'whole of government' approach to drug problems – including volatile substances, but I am confident that the will exists at the political level to take this approach forward.

- Finally, I want to highlight research and informed practice.
- Certainly, some research has been conducted on inhalants and chroming but by no means to the same extent as other substances in our community. Cannabis, heroin – even alcohol and tobacco – have quite rightly been the subject of quite comprehensive research and policy activities. These activities have contributed much to Australia's approach to how we intervene and treat those struggling with drug problems in their lives.
- Volatile substances must start to attract this same level of interest and certainly this conference is an important part in raising the profile of this issue.
- I want to raise this point – the need to translate the fine research we have available in Australia into practice – indeed this is the subject of an ANCD effort to produce a national magazine. Whilst the magazine is still in the developmental phase, the ANCD is very enthusiastic about this project as we see it as a very vital 'missing link' between what the research says we should do and what is happening in the field.
- For this reason, I want to congratulate the AIC for bringing together such a diverse range of people with expertise to discuss this problem. The ANCD is concerned about this issue and will be very interested in the outcomes from this conference.
- Thank you for the invitation to speak to you today, I look forward to listening to the following speakers with great interest.

References

1. 'Petrol Sniffing in Aboriginal Communities: A Review of Interventions' Peter d'Abbs and Sarah McLean
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3. 'Review of the Commonwealth's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Substance Misuse Program' Final Report 1999 OATSIH, Dept of Health and Aged Care
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