

CAYLUS and the Opal Alliance



This text outlines a number of strategies enacted by Central Australian Youth Link Up service (CAYLUS), a federally funded youth wellbeing project under the Department of Health and Ageing. CAYLUS aims at reducing inhalant abuse through improving the quality of life of youth in the region through a community development process. Our tactics include supply reduction, demand reduction, strategic casework and rehabilitation support. This text breaks into three sections, basically pre-Opal strategies, advocating for Opal, and post-Opal strategies.

The first section looks at the CAYLUS strategies and activities from when it started in 2001 to 2006 when low aromatic Opal became a real possibility. During that time, there were hundreds of chronic petrol sniffers in all the remote communities and in Alice Springs. We worked with communities to develop and resource a range of local solutions where possible. Solutions usually included supporting activities for young people, family based casework, supporting rehabilitation and reducing the availability of inhalants.

The second section focuses on when Opal became a possibility. CAYLUS strategy was to advocate for a regional roll-out. Over the first five years we had seen how effective Avgas/Comgas was as a supply reduction strategy, especially as a regional response. We joined two other organizations to form the Opal Alliance, an advocacy group that encouraged the Federal Government to subsidize the supply and wide distribution of Opal in Central Australia.

As well as CAYLUS, the Opal Alliance consisted of the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council (NPY) and General Properties Trust (GPT). NPY represented the families of the young people sniffing petrol, who were very concerned for their youth and clear that they needed help to deal with this dangerous situation. GPT, a corporation that had holdings in Central Australia, became involved when they tried to stock Opal at their service station at Yulara Resort but were not allowed by existing Commonwealth guidelines, despite knowing that some of their fuel was being sniffed in nearby communities. We all wanted to see a full realization of the potential of Opal.

As a consequence of the advocacy, Opal was rolled out regionally from 2006, and the 2008 D'Abbs and Shaw study of the impact of the Opal strategy reported a 94% reduction in inhalant abuse in the southern region of the NT. Inhalant abuse in the region remains low.

The third section outlines the post-Opal strategies and tactics that have capitalized on the opportunities created by the regional Opal roll out. CAYLUS has brokered and developed resources to reduce some of the environmental risks for young people in

remote communities. We have supported the development and enacting of the NT's excellent new legislation, the Volatile Substance abuse Prevention Act (VSAP Act) which does not criminalise someone for their substance abuse problems, but does protect the community from the major harms such addictions can cause if left unchecked. We continue to support rehabilitation options and we continue to advocate for fine tuning of the Opal strategy.

This story shows that Opal is not enough by itself without an array of other strategies, and outlines the strategies we utilized and continue to utilise. It also shows that while some strategies make sense at some times in the campaign, they are not effective at other stages. Although Opal does not address the underlying causes of the inhalant abuse, it creates a window of opportunity to address these underlying issues. However, this story also shows that without Opal, other strategies tried in the region did not work as effectively. I would argue that supply reduction is the necessary precondition of any successful attempt to address a chronic substance abuse situation.

Update

The writing for this document was mostly completed in mid 2008, and much has moved on since that time. Sniffing happens in sporadic outbreaks in our region, and there are resources and proven strategies now in place to respond effectively. The Macdonnell Shire is providing youth development activities as Shire policy. NPY now provide the youth services in the four Southern communities, having won the next three year contract. Another wave of youth diversionary funding has flowed through the region, been spent and independently evaluated, with clear lessons that will hopefully improve the effectiveness of any future waves of funding.

We have nearly completed the \$3 million ABA building program on time and on budget, and the ABA has approved another \$5 million wave of youth program infrastructure for the CAYLUS region. The VSAP Act has been reviewed and improved, with another review planned that could see legislation that reflects what we have learned from our supply reduction work with retailers. Most of Ilpurla Rehabilitation Outstation's inhalant clients (an average of 17 per month for the last year) now come from the Top End and interstate. Opal was trialed in 2010 in a remote Canadian community that has chronic inhalant issues.

The Opal strategy is being expanded into other regions of Australia, although currently without the Commonwealth legislative support required to ensure it's full effect can be realised. In response to advocacy, the Commonwealth commissioned an independent evaluation of the cost/benefit of enacting legislation that can allow the Federal Health Minister to require the stocking of Opal in specific sensitive locations. It found major savings in terms of lives and money (\$1.4 billion over 25 years), but the Commonwealth has yet to act on it and the current extension of the Opal zone is being done without legislative support.

For continuing information on CAYLUS check our website.

Dedication

CAYLUS would not be as effective or nearly as much fun without the youthful genius of my colleague and co-manager Tristan Ray.

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Section 1 : CAYLUS

1. History of CAYLUS – starting with a photo in *The Australian*

In 2000 *The Australian* newspaper printed a photo of a disabled petrol abuser in a wheelchair being pushed by his aged parents, with Uluru in the background.



The Prime Minister reacted to the horror engendered by this grim vision of life in remote Indigenous Australia by allocating funding to two anti-sniffing programs in the NT, one in the Top End, and one in Central Australia.

CAYLUS – the Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service – started in 2002. It based its model on Petrol Link-Up (PLU), a successful federally funded program that ran in Central Australia in the mid 1990s. This program used community development as a tool to develop and implement strategies to address the inhalant abuse that was severe in the South Australian Pitjantjatjara lands, and becoming an increasing problem in the Southern part of the NT. PLU finished in 1997 after it helped introduce Avgas into the Pitjantjatjara lands, which brought about an almost complete cessation of petrol sniffing when it was first introduced.

Avgas, or Comgas, is a low aromatic aviation fuel that can be used in cars instead of standard unleaded petrol. The Federal Government attempted to re-fund PLU, but the organisations given the task of keeping it going failed to hire a worker, and after 12 months, the funding was withdrawn. This left the communities with an excellent supply reduction tactic - replacement fuel - but no ongoing support, especially in the form of demand reduction. Over time, the inhalant abuse re-started, increased and eventually the presence of both petrol sniffing and Avgas undermined the replacement fuel tactic, and more and more communities went back to standard unleaded fuel instead of Avgas. Avgas was not developed for use in cars, and due in part to the high lead content, using it caused permanent damage after three tanks.

CAYLUS submitted a summary of this period to the Senate Committee – see Section 11 for more details – as a warning not to let this situation repeat itself in the context of Opal, the next replacement fuel. CAYLUS wanted to encourage the Federal Government to take the opportunities that Opal presented to enact the demand reduction that addresses the underlying issues.

In Central Australia, a consortium of local organisations had been meeting since the end of PLU in 1997 to try to get some funding for an agency to address the inhalant abuse that was increasing in the NT. This consortium developed the proposal that was eventually funded in 2001. Tangentyere Council was given carriage of the project, with the other members of the Consortium being on a steering committee. Further disagreement amongst the Consortium saw a number of organisations withdraw, and the \$1 million funding reallocated mainly to specific community projects to keep the remaining stakeholders at the table long enough to get the program started. From a program with a co-ordinator and two field workers with three Troop Carriers and a \$40k quick response brokerage, it became a program with one co-ordinator, no vehicle and the rest of the funds already allocated to those organisations still at the table at the time.

Not surprisingly, Tangentyere had to advertise three times before the writer applied and won the position, which was described to me by most colleagues as a poisoned chalice – *“you’ll be blamed for every petrol sniffer in the region”*. However, I did not want to see the federal funding disappear as it had done previously with PLU, and the situation was desperate. Petrol sniffing was rampant and unchallenged in Central Australia, with almost every community having increasing cohorts of petrol sniffing youths. As one policeman said to me *“I didn’t used to feel too sorry for Aboriginal people because they all had such great childhoods, but with petrol sniffing, that’s all turned to shit as well”*



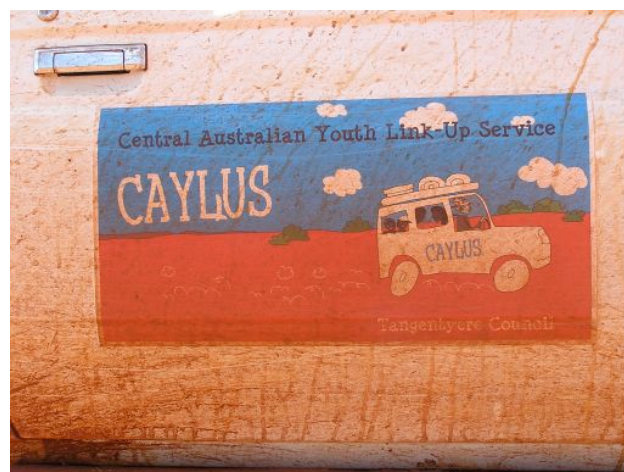
Drawing by author used in community education program

The writer started work in November, 2002. There was no flexibility re the brokerage allocated to the program, which had been wisely sacrificed to keep the stakeholders at the table to get the project going. I spent a lot of time negotiating the use of these funds with the Consortium members. Because they were one off, and because there was no capacity to meet regional needs with the funds, most of these funds disappeared without a trace. However, CAYLUS had the potential to be more than a short-term funding body, and I pursued the community development aspect of the work. For a while, I had to hitch to remote communities, or borrow vehicles from other Tangentyere programs, which were also under-resourced. After getting around to the communities and “kicking some goals” I outlined the vehicle situation to the Consortium and was allowed to vary the funds to purchase a Troop Carrier in April 2003. It’s not rocket science that transport was an essential tool if the program was going to be relevant to the remote community stakeholders. It allowed a quick response to community requests to attend meetings about inhalant issues.

As far as possible, I was getting petrol sniffing back on the agenda. It was always an issue in remote communities and the Indigenous people I knew were keen to talk, and even keener to act. My background helped here : I had been working as a Probation and Parole Officer from 1986 to 1994 and then subsequently as a Night Patrol support worker in the remote region west of Alice. So people knew me and knew I had shown some diligence in working with people to try to improve conditions in the region. My roles were both law and justice related, and had meant I had been working closely with people who sniffed petrol and their families from day one. I recall that in my first week of living at Papunya in 1987, I called a community meeting about the petrol sniffing that was happening there when I arrived. One of those most likely to be

shamed by the meeting turned up with a knife and threatened me. My friends in the crowd got between us and mediated the situation and the young man left, still waving his knife, but also pointing it at himself, threatening suicide if he was shamed by what we said or did at the public meeting. It was a good introduction to the complexities of the issue. We got to be friends after a few years. He passed away in 2005 with a can against his face.

In 2003, the Commonwealth funding body found funds for a second position plus a brokerage that was left-over funds from a training program. In August, 2003, CAYLUS hired Tristan Ray, an energetic young man with experience running remote programs in Yuendumu, who had had close contact with the successful Mt Theo project which I will cover in more detail later. Ray's exceptional skills prompted me to advocate to Tangentyere that he be appointed at the same level as myself – Co-ordinator – rather than at a lower level as it more accurately reflected the dynamics in the program. Tangentyere proved itself admirably flexible in this matter, eschewing the pyramid in favour of a more responsive, flatter authority structure in CAYLUS. Having two Co-ordinators meant decisions were more fully discussed, and each felt it was possible to take initiatives as required within the general policy framework we had negotiated with the Consortium. For the first two years, we almost always travelled together to remote communities and other meetings. This gave us a lot of Toyota time to work out strategies and talk through issues. Two staff also meant there were two of us to run community meetings and do the legwork on the ground and in Alice Springs. Our meetings got more high tech, with Tristan projecting photos from our collection to illustrate points we were talking about. We also started to melt foam boxes at community meetings as a way of expressing the core problem with petrol sniffing (see Section 3 below for the melting box story). This tactic worked very well. Meetings usually took off after that introduction.



The CAYLUS logo on the side of our first Troopie, after a muddy trip

The way we run meetings probably has something to do with our success. These revolve around actually wanting to hear what people have to say, rather than having

an agenda to get agreement to, which seems the characteristic of a lot of “consultations” that go on. Tristan was especially popular because of his jokey manner and quirky sense of humour, but we were both known and respected in the region. This underlying trust is not something that meeting techniques can replicate, and contributed substantially to our success. However, our experience does point to the need to use local expertise and knowledge where it exists.

One of our tactics was to improve the capacity of remote community youth programs, and to run school holiday activities in the communities to reduce the attraction of inhalant abuse through providing diversionary activities. We found funds to hire youth workers to run daily programs during these high risk times. However, the workload undertaken by the Community Development workers in providing these activities grew to the point where it was compromising our core work. In 2006 we sourced funding for another position from the NT Police Juvenile Diversion Unit. This position is a regional youth program support worker. We were fortunate to attract Yarran Cavalier, a worker with great commitment to Indigenous equity, great experience living on remote communities in the region, and a seemingly endless network of skilled and committed youth workers who proved invaluable to our recruitment process.

Over the course of CAYLUS, we have had innumerable people working for us on short term contracts – we expand and grow expertise as the circumstances require. These have included rehab outstation support workers, school holiday program workers, youth workers, local language speakers and cultural brokers, builders and admin support workers.

We also sourced funds from Federal Attorney Generals for a Volatile Substance Abuse supply reduction worker. This position, now funded by Health and Ageing, supports retailers to reduce supply of inhalants at point of sale, as well as some casework with individuals identified by retailers through this process. As always, the Department of Health and Ageing has been supportive and understanding of our needs.

As stated, CAYLUS grew from a photo in *The Australian* which mobilised public opinion to press for resources to address this unchecked epidemic, estimated at 500 I the region. In the background at the start were a number of committed workers trying to keep the success of PLU in the ears of government. In the communities was a population of Indigenous people who were sick of petrol sniffing and greatly concerned by it, but who had no capacity to stop the practice without support. In CAYLUS there was a committed group of experienced remote community workers, providing strategic support across the Central Australia region.

The Federal and NT funding bodies and the AER Foundation have been very supportive of CAYLUS and have done all they could to help us meet the needs in the region. The Australian Senate and both Australian and NT Parliaments have been very responsive to CAYLUS’ advocacy. Corporations – mainly BP and GPT -

undertook effective partnerships on this issue with clear success. The success of this project demonstrates how powerful a community action can be – a huge group of people all taking whatever steps they can to deal with the issue.

2. A snapshot of Central Australia late 2002 – a volatile situation

Petrol sniffing had spread from the Pitjantjatjara lands in SA into the southern NT on a number of occasions over the preceding 50 years since it started there after WW2. Prior to the 1990s, it had not taken root anywhere in the Southern NT other than Docker River, which was in the South West of the NT, the closest remote community to the Pitjantjatjara lands. There were outbreaks that were either dealt with immediately by the community involved or within a couple of months. In some communities there were individuals or small family groups who sniffed regularly, usually at outstations and never in an obvious way. A serious outbreak in Papunya in the early 90s was stopped through the concerted efforts of the local Night Patrol service. One of the NP said *“Used to be sniffers' tracks were everywhere, but now our tracks are everywhere.”*

In the late 80s, the Mt Theo program out of Yuendumu came into existence and prevented the chronic sniffing in that community through a decade of constant work. With the help of a handful of dedicated “whitefellas”, some local Indigenous people used the remote Mt Theo outstation as a rehab/respice centre as a supply reduction tactic, and provided a vibrant recreation program in Yuendumu as a demand reduction tactic. The community development aspects of the Mt Theo success was the model CAYLUS would follow.

In the late 90s, for no reason I can propose except that it was bound to happen sometime, sniffing suddenly became the defining characteristic of youth culture in remote communities to the west of the Stuart Highway. Risk factors accumulate once you start looking at remote Aboriginal communities : chronic substance abuse, poverty, lack of infrastructure and employment (ironic how governments fail to provide basic infrastructure in remote communities and yet expect people to find employment there), the failure of the education system – the list is as long as you care to make it.



Risk factors for inhalant abuse in remote communities

Suddenly and inevitably, petrol sniffing was all the rage. As one observer stated, *“holding a can against your face in a remote community has the same statement value for youth as holding a skateboard”*

Local people did not like this situation, and tried to stop it, but it was beyond their capacity. The Papunya Night Patrol tried confronting the people who were sniffing petrol, but this failed to work and the potential violence of the situation made the community council elect to disband the Night Patrol rather than risk a major family fight. Remote communities in the Western Desert all had groups of petrol sniffing youths walking around openly sniffing, while holding cans to their faces, or even tying cut-off plastic drink bottles to their heads so they could ride pushbikes or motorcycles while sniffing. The groups consisted of most of the teenage populations, plus numerous older men and sometimes women. They would sniff petrol day and night, occasionally leaving the houses they occupied as a group to roam the streets of the communities in gangs. One Nurse at Papunya described going out at night to an emergency *“I had to drive through a sea of petrol sniffers – the group would slowly part for my Ambulance to let me through. It was frightening.”* Health staff in remote communities reported an increase in STDs due to the uninhibited actions of the petrol sniffing groups.

In this period, there were increasing suicides – 8 in a two year period in the Western Desert – which people attributed to sniffing. There were also fatal accidents – a car crash that killed a whole family, an immolation due to walking into a campfire holding a can of petrol, a suicide threat that suddenly became all too real. I was in Papunya on two occasions when someone died from petrol sniffing during the early years of CAYLUS. On one occasion, a chronic user just failed to wake up in the morning – respiratory collapse. On another occasion, someone hanged themselves.

On the second occasion, I was present when the elders of Papunya came together soon after the death to do something about the sniffing. This was not a Council organised meeting – it just arose around this group of elders desire to do something. They elected to ban the sale of fuel in Papunya. As a long term strategy, it could not work, but it had the severity that characterised actions taken from a traditional law position : the equivalent of a spear in the leg. They knew the situation was desperate, and they were taking what steps they could to stop the sniffing. The strategy unraveled over the next few weeks, as there had to be exemptions, and sniffable petrol was freely available at the next community about 35k away. Whenever people said “*it’s up to the local people to stop sniffing*” as a cop-out from helping them – some sort of self-determination strategy gone horribly wrong - I always remember these elders trying hard to do something with the resources they had available. I also remembered how during this shortage, it was reported to me that youth in Papunya would walk around with empty cans against their faces in defiance of the ban on fuel.

When I started in CAYLUS in late 2002, I hitched a ride out into the Western Desert with FACS NT to talk to people and check out the situation myself. Every community except one had gangs of sniffers evident as soon as one drove in. They were everywhere in plain sight, sniffing while adults played cards and got on with their lives. In one community I looked around – there were youth sniffing petrol in a 360 degree panorama from where I stood : sniffing on bikes, sniffing on the back of utes, sniffing in cars, sniffing while watching card games, gangs of pre-teen girls walking around each with a blue bottle of fuel held against their face. One worker told me kids who did not sniff would still carry around a can of fuel to be part of the gang. I remember in Kintore a station wagon stopped : it was the local Aboriginal pastor who told me something should be done about the sniffing. In the back seat, his granddaughter, about 10 years old, was sniffing blue petrol. Next to her was a baby being suckled by another of the family.



Sniffing was everywhere

In numbers, we estimated about 500 people were sniffing regularly in the region, out of a remote population of around 5000. This accorded with the figures coming from the Pitjatjantjara lands, which saw the sniffing population at around the same overall percentage. Sniffing was the dominant youth culture in the Western Desert.

In terms of resources available to the community had available to deal with this problem, there was CAYLUS – at that stage one worker with no car and no discretionary funds. There were some rehab options – which I will go into in more detail in section 19 – which had limited capacity at that stage. Mt Theo was a good resource for the Yuendumu community, but had little capacity to spread it's efforts further. They had an inherent cultural reality that meant the service could only accept Warlpiri people. This was the strength of the program in one way – the Warlpiri cultural dimension – but it was a limiting factor when other tribal groups tried to get access to the outstation rehab/respite service. Ilpurla, another rehab outstation, had stopped operating due to a number of factors, partly the administrative load that came with OATSIH funding of the service and partly due to a lack of sufficient core funding. Intjartnama outstation was also reduced in capacity due to the death of one of the founders, and it never again operated at the capacity it had operated at in the early 1980s and 1990s. There were no rehab services that took inhalant clients in Alice Springs.

Anyway, rehab was never going to solve the problem – both because of the limited numbers of clients it could handle and because the clients would eventually return to the remote communities where sniffing was the dominant activity. There was no NT legislation that allowed sniffing to be dealt with by the police. The school holidays had no organised diversionary programs and were high risk times for remote youth, especially the long hot summer holidays. Schools reported taking weeks or months to break youth from the sniffing habit to get them back into school after the holidays. Recreation programs in remote communities were patchy – some were not operating at all, some were running but were badly resourced, some ran only for the football players and no services were provided for any other group, and some were only run for members of particular families. There were no systematic police checks on staff recruited for these positions, and little supervision by anyone even within the communities.

There was great scope for improvement.

3. The CAYLUS Strategy – supply reduction, demand reduction, casework, rehab outstations and opportunism.

CAYLUS' initial strength lay in the workers' connections and experience in the remote communities. This gave us the capacity to raise the subject of petrol sniffing without the usual confusion felt by Indigenous people in this situation : who are these people and what is their role? Tristan and I were well known in all the communities we operated in. My interest in petrol sniffing had been established through my previous roles as Probation Officer and then assisting the remote community Night Patrols. When Tristan came on board in late 2003, he brought similar credibility due to his having established a radio network employing local people in the region. We were known and trusted, with an acknowledged stake in helping people in these communities deal with substance abuse and community development.

With this foot in the door, we would hold local council meetings to work out the options and possibilities for action, then we would hold community meetings to discuss the issues. We would often start the meetings by pouring petrol over a polystyrene box : the box melts away into a grey sludge.



Melting a box with petrol at a community meeting at Mt Liebig

This was a particularly effective bit of circus, as it communicated the danger of petrol sniffing without having to resort to complex discussions about neural damage etc. Often there were people sniffing petrol attending the meetings – sometimes I would get the petrol for the demonstration from one through politely asking – one of the many advantages of a pre-existing relationship. Other people at the meeting would comment on the melting box to those attending who were sniffing.

Our public meetings were managed so as not to be blaming anyone for the sniffing. We acknowledged the factors that pushed young people into sniffing, and the attempts by families to stop them. We wanted allies and shaming people was not the way to realise this objective. We would accept and honour comments from the crowd, and found the people had a lot to say. A good meeting was one where we did very little talking and a lot of listening. We emphasised that the sniffing would not be going away overnight, and that a concerted effort would be required to beat it. People found

this strangely satisfying – as though they knew that sometimes there has to be a long struggle before a valuable goal can be achieved.



a community meeting under trees at Willowra

We outlined the supply and demand reduction strategies using the carrot and stick metaphor : carrots to draw the sniffers away from petrol, sticks to make it harder for them to stay petrol sniffing. From our combined experience in remote communities, and especially our specialised knowledge of Mt Theo and other long term inhalant prevention programs, we were able to talk about strategies that other communities had tried and to what effect. Sometimes Tristan and I did a double act, with me taking the lead and chairing the meeting and him pulling photos illustrating various points from our computer and projecting them up onto a screen behind us. Often we had interpreters to assist us, and often the meetings drifted into local languages for periods.

We would always get suggestions as to immediate actions to take, as well as longer term strategies to pursue. We would then enact the tactics that emerged from the discussion and develop groups of stakeholders to see them through. This often involved sourcing funds for local projects, facilitating the project once funded and doing the admin and reporting work for it. As well as meeting local needs in fairly short term timeframes, this process gave us credibility with the stakeholders locally as we were allies in the projects, obviously trying to assist the community deal with inhalant issues. Our work realising short-term tactics gave us the community backing needed to move on the longer term ones. It also gave people hope that there was practical support for them in dealing with the sniffing, and that it could be beaten.

This flexibility is one of the critical aspects of CAYLUS : the capacity to do whatever needs doing to make it happen. In comparison to most departmental systems, we are not limited by our job description to only provide part of a service. To illustrate, how would an officer from a government education department take action if they were told that the answer to falling school attendance was to reduce the grog coming in to the community. The education worker would not have the capacity to deal with the issues, which cross many departmental boundaries. CAYLUS was the shifting

spanner in the remote communities' tool kit.

The remote community scene is a chaotic one, with innumerable governmental initiatives playing out in a turbulent and complex environment. Opportunities arise unexpectedly in this context, so we adapted and capitalised on these opportunities. As Sun Tsu said in *"The Art Of War"* – *"plans are essential before an engagement with the enemy, but it is also essential that they be thrown away once actual engagement begins and the need is to respond to emergent reality."*

To illustrate the range of actions we took, the following is a day in the life of CAYLUS, this one at Areyonga, a remote community 300k west of Alice Springs.

In November, 2003, we were called to the community to discuss the petrol sniffing situation there, which was escalating and at that stage involved most of the teenagers. After as many informal meetings as possible to get the local situation clarified, Tristan and I met with the remote community council, the local clinic and the local store. These are the only agencies in Areyonga. We discussed options. As part of this discussion, I would draw images on whiteboards, as most of the community members cannot read or write. This communications tactic enhanced our ability to talk about complex situations, and showed respect to the participants that a board full of incomprehensible English writing does not.



An example of the drawing based communication system used

Later that day, CAYLUS and representatives from local organizations held a community meeting around the melting box. After the meeting, we took the young men out bush to cook roo tails and discuss what would make their community better. We did some video shooting, making a spontaneous fun movie directed by one of the locals. That afternoon we edited the footage into a program and burned a DVD to show at the community movie night we had arranged during the community meeting. We showed the locally made movie to shrieks of laughter from the women, the young men embarrassed but pleased. They made us play it five times. Then we showed *"The*

Gods Must Be Crazy” a particularly popular movie out bush as it depicts whitefellas as objects of slapstick fun, with the central character a Kalahari bushman, one of the other remaining hunter/gatherer cultures. While the movie played, Tristan, a local man and I fixed the felt on the rec hall’s one pool table with an army blanket and an electric staple gun.



shooting pool on the army blanket table top

We still pursue the goals we developed in that community during that process and have had a number of wins in partnership with that community, including regular school holiday programs, the introduction of Avgas soon after our visit, casework with some individuals who moved to Alice Springs in search of inhalants, advocacy in government, practical support for the rec program and currently the possibility of enough capital for youth worker accommodation, which has been the limiting factor in the establishment of a high quality youth program.

Community development was our primary strategy. We did not envisage casework to be part of our work at first. I had some casework skills from my eight years as a Probation Officer in the Western Desert, but I had no confidence that it was the answer. In my experience, the environment had a greater effect on behaviour than the individual’s will. To introduce a metaphor I will return to often, it seemed the remote communities were a factory that produced petrol sniffers. All the factors inside the factory – illness, poverty, substance abuse, dispossession, racism, poor education, etc. ETC. – acted on the community people and resulted in sniffers coming out of the factory on a production line. Casework was done once people emerged from the factory, and as such, could never reduce the number that would be coming down the line in the future. CAYLUS had to get into the factory and take it apart : changing the environment in remote communities was our strategy.

Our mission statement reflects this objective : to address substance abuse amongst youth by improving the quality of life in the communities. However, you cannot stand up in front of a meeting and talk about helping without people bringing individuals forward that needed help. We tried to refer such people on to other casework

agencies, but over time we collected a number of individuals whose situation desperately needed immediate casework and who no-one else could help. This is the down side of the relationship nexus we operated in, and could have derailed our big picture efforts through being swamped by this sort of work, which goes from crisis to crisis. On one occasion I was writing a submission to get a youth program operating in a community that had none – a window had opened up for funding and I was trying to get through before it closed – when a suicidal youth was brought into the office by his parents. I had no choice but to leave the submission and the funding window closed before I could get back to it. The submission was the product of the lengthy community consultation process, and losing the window represented a major waste of time, but the young man did not kill himself.

We realised that we needed casework as part of our program and approached the Alcohol Education and Research Foundation (AERF) for funding for a position, which they granted. In 2004, we hired another experienced and locally credible worker – Phil Hassall – who had a law degree, a social work degree and twenty years experience doing casework in Central Australia. Between the three of us, we had seventy years of relevant local experience to bring into the mix. When our next worker, Yarran Cavalier, started a year later, and our total went up to ninety years. The caseworker took over the primary responsibility for casework, with occasional support from the Community Development workers, and CAYLUS had overcome a hurdle that could have derailed what was arguably the most significant aspect of our work : the long term community development – dismantling the factory.

Supporting existing rehab outstations were also part of our strategy. These provide respite for the community and a break in the cycle of substance abuse for the individual. The Mt Theo program demonstrated that chronic inhalant abuse could be stopped through community development process. Over time, they created a holistic approach that combined placing people at a remote petrol-free outstation plus the operation of a good recreation program back in the home community of Yuendumu. When CAYLUS started, Mt Theo was operating well, Intjartnama outstation was in decline due to the death of one of the founders, and Ilpurla was operating but needed support. We established working relationships with the outstations and have been working collaboratively to improve services with great effect. Both Mt Theo and Ilpurla have representatives in the CAYLUS Consortium.

These outstations are a critical tactic as there will be individuals who are currently addicted to inhalants who will not be reached by the environmental improvement strategy: they will not participate in diversionary activities and will undermine such efforts. In the post-Opal environment, the outstations play a crucial role in containing these individuals and therefore limiting their capacity to reignite sniffing. As I write, there has yet to have been a significant regional investment in improving the environment, and as such, it still contains all the risk factors for inhalant abuse. The factory is still there, not yet substantially changed but currently the production line is stopped.

We also assisted two elders who had been running a program for Arrente youth at their outstation at Ipolera near Hermannsburg, but this proved unsustainable over time due to the age of the elders involved and a lack of support from their immediate family.

Between the two established outstations, there is adequate capacity for the remote community needs of the region. In fact, Ilpurla is currently also accepting clients from the Top End due to the lack of similar services in that region. They also have enquiries from WA and SA for similar reasons. So the outstation capacity is there in the region to deal with the particular demographic that need extra support to break their addiction, and to provide the community with a level of protection from the spread of inhalant abuse in a still vulnerable community.

4. Avgas roll-out 2003 – myth busting in the Western Desert



a bumper sticker drawing the writer did for the Pitjatjantjara lands Avgas roll-out in the 90s

Avgas is an aviation fuel that has little of the volatile substances that make car fuel intoxicating to inhale. Replacing unleaded fuel with Avgas was a tactic tried in the 90s to some degree in the southern part of the NT. It followed on from its success as a replacement fuel in remote communities in the Top End and in the Pitjatjantjara communities in the mid 90s. This replacement was subsidised by the Federal Government to keep the cost at the fuel bowsers the same despite the extra cost of Avgas. This Avgas strategy cost the Commonwealth about 17c per litre.

The Avgas tactic demonstrates that the fuel itself is not a magic bullet, as both in the Pitjatjantjara lands and in the southern NT, it had showed initial promise, but without other levels of support that were not available to the communities at that stage, it failed in the medium term. Communities found they had Avgas, which was wrecking their cars, and also a large number of petrol sniffers. The communities eventually gave up on Avgas and switched back to normal unleaded. If Petrol Link-Up 2 had been funded, allowing for the ongoing support of remote communities and development of local diversionary programs, the tactic might well have had a more sustainable outcome. By the time CAYLUS started in late 2002, none of the remote communities in the southern NT were still using Avgas.

By late 2003 there were rumors that Opal was being developed by BP with the encouragement of the Federal Government, but the extent of the inhalant abuse was such that we thought it was worth talking to the remote communities about Avgas

again. We found there were stories in circulation that Avgas could be sniffed if a variety of readily available substances were added to it. In one community we found people thought that if you added brown sugar to Avgas, it became intoxicating to inhale. We knew this was not true from the Avgas research we had done and from talking to people involved in the Petrol Link-Up Avgas roll-out. We found that the source of these rumors in that particular community was the local Health Department Nurse, who had heard the story in the Pitjatjantjara lands and was passing it on as truth. We tactfully convinced the local community council that it was not true, and in part because of our longstanding relationships with the community, our story was trusted and Avgas reintroduced. The number of inhalant abusers fell overnight from sixty to six.

The above example was the template of how we worked to bring the Avgas option back into the region. We held community and council meetings outlining the truth about Avgas. We were always clear that it would damage vehicles – three tanks would permanently damage the catalytic converter of any unleaded car – and that it would not address the underlying issues that caused people to sniff petrol. Despite this, the communities most affected chose to bring Avgas back, and there was a substantial drop in petrol sniffing. The population of inhalant abusers was greatly reduced, but those still wanting to get unleaded petrol had two options : they could move to the community closest to sources of unleaded fuel – in the case of the Western Desert that was Papunya which was 40k from Ikuntji which at that stage refused to go onto Avgas – or move into Alice Springs.

The first option meant there were just over 100 people regularly abusing petrol in Papunya despite having Avgas as the only available fuel in the community, which meant we focused a lot of our energy on that community and on Ikuntji as the local source of the fuel that was being sniffed in Papunya.

The second option (moving into Alice Springs) had an unexpected side effect : once visible petrol sniffing appeared in Alice Springs it became a political issue in a way that it never was when the sniffing was happening in far away Indigenous communities. There were petrol sniffers walking thru the Mall with cans on their faces and the police had no power to deal with them under any act that existed at that time, especially if the individual was not a juvenile and therefore not subject to Welfare involvement. This resulted in the NT Attorney General Dr Peter Toyne calling an emergency meeting in Alice Springs in early 2004, and in the NT Government's development of the Volatile Substance Abuse Prevention Act, which created a number of legal options for dealing with inhalant abuse. The next section (5. *Retailers work 2004 – point of sale supply reduction work*) outlines one aspect of the supply reduction strategy CAYLUS was enacting in relation to Alice Springs.

The main point about Avgas was that the community was given the choice as to whether to bring it in. CAYLUS outlined the truth of the situation, emphasising the damage that would inevitable be done to vehicles, and the fact that Avgas would not solve the underlying issues. We offered support, but did not coerce communities in

any way. As always, we did not blame or threaten in our dealings with the communities involved, but treated all parties with respect and compassion. The communities that chose to bring it in saw the immediate positive results of their action, and took heart. Avgas demonstrated that community action to change the environment could succeed. This was as important as the reduction in sniffing, as the second stage of the strategy (demand reduction) needed the support of the community to be effective.

However, it should be noted that communities are composed of a number of different groups : not everyone in every community supported Avgas. Some people had vested interest in keeping petrol a saleable commodity. Some liked to trade petrol for sexual favours, or to use it to create the disinhibition that favoured their exploitation of others. Some did not believe the strategy would really work. Others thought it was the responsibility of families to stop their members sniffing petrol and preferred to play the blame game. In one community, the Council Clerk introduced CAYLUS to the public meeting as *“those liars from town”*. In part I make this point because I have seen the debilitating effect on remote communities of stories from successful programs that pretend that the whole community was behind the program from the start, and that was the secret of its success. Most communities know that this sort of support is impossible to generate in their own community, and so give up on trying to implement the strategy proposed. Thus, the temptation to tell a fantastic and simplified version of a story can derail progress by placing the goal posts too far away. The reality is that no one strategy will have the complete support of the community, especially when it is in the beginning of the implementation phase. Practically, a strategy needs to be well known to the community, including possible risks and benefits, and it needs to be supported by key people and groups within the community.

5. Work with retailers 2004 – point of sale supply reduction work

The sniffing problem was somewhat reduced in the remote communities, though still going strong, and it was now becoming an increasing problem in Alice Springs. As outlined above, the Avgas roll-out saw a number of heavy inhalant users move into Alice Springs over the summer of 03/04. This overloaded the Welfare and Police systems, especially as there was no facility that could accept intoxicated juveniles. There were more than 100 regular heavy users in Alice Springs, being highly visible, breaking into garages and private cars to steal fuel, and abusing the propellant from spray paint which was readily available and for unknown reasons the drug of choice of the inhalant abusers in Alice Springs, despite the easy availability of unleaded fuel.

The NT Attorney General, Dr Peter Toyne, called a crisis response meeting in Alice Springs in early 04 to develop strategies to deal with the situation. CAYLUS undertook to do a supply reduction strategy with the retailers of spray paint in Alice Springs. We hired Anne Mosey, a very experienced inhalant worker, to undertake the project. In the initial research phase, after talking to the police and youth workers, she estimated 60 cans of spray were getting into the hands of the inhalant abusers every day, mostly from three sources. We undertook a retailer education program as the first part of the process. Retailers had been approached in the past by youth workers and challenged about their sale of spray paint, but this had had no effect. The previous approaches were characterised by the retailers as blaming and threatening, and had no effect on their practices. CAYLUS used our strategy of talking in a non-blaming way, avoiding threats or bluster. We found the retailers were just as concerned as we were about the abuse of their products, and were willing to engage in partnerships with us to prevent it.

The main engagement ploy we used was to involve the retailers in the preparation of a kit that contained all the information required to enact supply reduction at the point of sale : background information about inhalant abuse, relevant laws especially about the requirement on retailers not to sell inhalants if they thought the product was going to be abused, contact details for relevant agencies, a flow chart of recommended responses in cases where sale was refused, and a customer record sheet developed in collaboration with the NT Police that was used to track sales to individuals for further investigation by the police should the product be found to be abused. The design of this kit gave the retailers a point of engagement with the strategy where they were partners with CAYLUS in the development of the strategy. This ensured a sense of commitment to the process that would not have been fostered if the kit was developed elsewhere and simply sent to the retailers.

During this process, the owner of the main outlet for spray paint that was being abused elected to no longer stock this product. Their product was the cheapest spray paint in Alice Springs, and the brand they stocked was the one youth workers and other people on the coalface found to be most regularly abused by the inhalant abusers. The retailer made a public statement that they could no longer accept the risk

that their product would be abused, and in particular that it was being traded for sex. The Attorney General purchased the retailers remaining stock as a gesture of support, and CAYLUS organised for an anti-sniffing mural to be painted using the spray by the youth of Yuendumu. This mural is in the Alice Springs Hospital.

The other retailers were proactive in caging their spray paint to prevent theft. CAYLUS offered to pay for the cages in some cases, which surprised and delighted the retailers, who were used to agencies coming to them with demands and threats rather than practical support. Although we offered to pay, no retailer ever took us up on it, and the caging was done from their own funds. CAYLUS collected and checked out the customer records mentioned above. Retailers reported some people elected not to purchase cans of paint once they knew their name and license details were going to be recorded. CAYLUS gave key retailers a list of people who we knew to be either sniffing paint or supplying it to others to sniff. These people would not be sold paint, and the retailers would offer to call CAYLUS so we could come down and discuss this with the customer. The customers elected to do this on few occasions. In a few instances, people had the same names as other people who were abusing paint, and we could sort this out quickly. Mostly however, people on the banned list simply went away. Often they would try to convince tourists and other shoppers to buy paint for them, so we made up a poster and eventually some cards outlining that purchasing paint for other people both risked the life and health of the person who was abusing the product, but also could result in criminal charges for the one supplying it, especially once informed of this possibility through the poster and card.

These tactics were pursued systematically, and over a couple of months, the abuse of spray paint dropped dramatically. We estimate that the number of cans being abused dropped from more than 60 per day to less than 6. Again, supply reduction proved to be a very efficient strategy.



The author (holding Retailers Kit) next to NT AG Peter Toyne at SuperCheap Autos, in front of steel cage containing inhalants

The retailer who was the source of the next cheapest spray paint was very proactive in this strategy, and eventually located a source of low toxicity spray paint. This brand had very little of the intoxicating propellant, and according to our informants, had little or no effect when sniffed. When this brand was stocked, paint sniffing came to an almost complete halt for about 6 months in 2007.

Eventually those addicted to inhalants moved on to glue and other inhalants, and we are continuing the strategy in relation to those substances. We use the same techniques of working with the retailers and are seeing the same success, but until there is a substantial investment in diversionary programs, the core group of addicted abusers will continue to seek inhalants to abuse, with the very real danger that the practice will spread and new recruits will be drawn into this abuse cycle.

6. Youth program support – demand reduction by the “Department of Fun”

Most of the remote communities in Central Australia had recreation programs funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family And Community Services and/or the NT government Department of Sport and Recreation. When CAYLUS started, these services were patchy, sometimes not operating for months on end, sometimes closing for the summer holidays, sometimes being colonised by one local family who only provided services to their relations, sometimes being taken over by the older footballers and thus not providing any services to the majority of the community. In the longer term, we knew we had to develop these services to provide diversionary activities for the youth. We knew from the success of the Mt Theo project and the Docker River Youth Program that this was a crucial tactic in preventing inhalant abuse and we developed a model for the sort of youth program that would meet the community's needs.

Philosophically it was a youth development project, involving the whole community in developing activities for the young that would create positive opportunities for intergenerational skill and knowledge transmission, and also provide educational opportunities. When we started the Willowra Youth Program in partnership with Mt Theo, using NT funding, our worker was instructed to not run any activities for the first three months, but instead to spend the time talking to everyone about how the program could operate. This resulted in a strong sense of ownership of the program in the community, and in the program reflecting the needs of the community. This contrasts with a program that arrives in a community and starts to run discos and other mainstream activities without this consultation, basically disempowering the families in community by making them the passive recipients of youth services defined by outside agencies. We try to ensure agencies we work with know the difference between youth development programs that involve the whole community, and rec programs, which can be “bread and circuses” in a remote community setting.

Practically, it needed two youth development workers – one male, one female – two Troop Carriers – again one for each gender – a good rec hall with capacity for providing educational activities, designated youth worker accommodation in which the two workers did not have to share their space as well as work together. It needed a pool of funds to hire local people for specific activities – Mt Theo used its annual \$28k NT Sport and Rec grant to provide part-time work to dozens of older youth who supervised the younger participants. It needed support from external agencies to keep the program from falling into ruts, and to supervise the workers as this capacity was limited in the community. We did a costing to bring the remote communities where the majority of the sniffing happened up to this standard and found a need for approx \$11 million in infrastructure and an ongoing need for about \$1 million per year operational and salary funds. In the extended region, the estimate is \$20 million.

As it was clearly going to take a long time to get this sort of funding, we prioritised providing youth diversionary activities during the school holidays, and especially the

long summer holiday when there was no football, no school, many senior people were away at ceremonial business and money was harder than usual to get for a number of structural and cultural reasons. These were the times in which sniffing became the only activity available in the remote community for youth, and the core group of chronic sniffers would find easy recruits. Numbers using inhalants increased dramatically and teachers reported it took weeks to get young people back into a semblance of school habits when school restarted in late January. Thus, with the small grants we could access mostly through the NT RAAASS grants program (\$5000 per grant for each community) plus whatever other funds we could source from other programs, we organised school holiday programs in the remote communities of our region.

The design of the programs was negotiated with the groups in the communities we had formed alliances with, mostly the local council and key individuals. Months prior to the holidays, activities were planned and where possible the community would nominate people they wanted to run the activities. We try to use the same people during each holiday so they can develop relationships with the locals. We started small, providing activities in four communities in the Western Desert over the June/July school holidays in 2003. These activities (songwriting, photography, video making, art) fed into the NAIDOC Celebrations which were at the end of this period on that year, allowing us to showcase some Western Desert youth bands and dancers to the wider community. When the second CAYLUS worker Tristan Ray started later that year, he had some brokerage funds attached to his position which we used to increase the scope of these activities over the 03/04 summer holiday, providing more activities in more communities. Over the years, this part of our work grew to cover all the remote communities in our service area. We accessed funding from a number of sources, mostly in small amounts which made for extensive reporting obligations.



Holiday youth program – fixing bikes

As well as providing alternative activities, this program gave us the capacity to locate and try out remote area youth workers on short term contracts. Through using

specific workers for specific communities, we developed a labour pool of people we knew and trusted who assisted us in longer term projects at other times. This pool of known workers was especially valuable when we were contracted by the Federal Government to provide the interim youth services in the four southern communities (Mutitjulu, Imanpa, Docker River and Apatula) in the seven months from December 2006 to July 2007. This was to allow time for a tender process to unfold, which I will comment on in section 16 below: *Diversionary programs - problems with tendering services in remote communities – Mt Theo was not built in a day.*

This experience also stood us in good stead when we were asked by Papunya and Ikuntji to provide their youth services from early 2007. This was in the post-Opal phase in which it was crucial that good youth activities were available to fill the gap left by Opal. It also helped during the establishment of the Willowra Youth Program, which CAYLUS and Mt Theo undertook in partnership from 2005. Until CAYLUS and Mt Theo got involved, Willowra had no youth program (in fact no council services at all due to the deregistration of the community council association by the previous NT CLP government) and the majority of the youth were abusing inhalants.

The school holiday programs were negotiated with the local community and other agencies where available. We had some success in accessing school resources through negotiations with local headmasters, but could never get the NT Department of Education to commit to always making such resources available. It's a shame that so many community funded resources are systematically locked up for the duration of the lengthy school holidays in the remote communities.

The NT Police funded a position to assist with this youth program support work, allowing us to recruit Yarran Cavalier. This increased our capacity to support youth programs through sourcing funding, providing logistical support, arranging extra activities to provide diversity to the youth of the communities and generally providing support to the remote youth workers, who were in danger of burn-out through isolation and lack of support. This sort of support is welcomed on the ground : one remote youth worker recently described CAYLUS as the fairy godmother of youth programs.

We moved where possible towards the model we propose as the basic standards of resources for a youth program, and through our work with various agencies, we increased the number of youth workers in Papunya to two – one male, one female – and in Ikuntji to 1.5, with one male worker full-time and one part-time female worker. We assisted Kintore, a large community on the WA border, locate funds for a second youth worker within the Council, and also have been able to convince the local Indigenous Health service to utilise one of its OATSIH funded AOD positions to assist with the youth work as a practical diversionary activity, giving that community three full-time youth workers (one male, two female).

Recently, we seem to have been successful in accessing \$3 million in ABA funds which were allocated by the previous federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs but

never used because there was too much political opposition and too much general chaos surrounding the Intervention which started mid 2007 – soon rebranded as the Northern Territory emergency Response (NTER). If we do succeed in accessing these funds, we will begin a building phase that will provide crucial youth program infrastructure in several remote communities.

Another complication in this area was the unfolding of the NT Government's Shire model for local government in 2008. Instead of more than 20 remote Central Australia communities being run as separate incorporated associations, they will be rolled together into two Shires and administered centrally from Alice Springs. CAYLUS' plan is to work with the Shires to facilitate them running the youth programs at a high level. We will be passing on the existing staff and infrastructure we generate to them once created, and will continue to have a support role for the youth programs under the new system of centralised management. We have developed experience and capacity in this field as part of the provision of these diversionary activities since 2003, and are keen to ensure the Shires have access to our experience from the beginning. Early negotiations with them have been positive.

This developmental work on demand reduction has unfolded in parallel with the other work we have done regarding supply reduction. Perhaps if this situation arises again, or exists in some other part of the world, the two strategies could be enacted in a more co-ordinated way. In an ideal world, the government would have rolled out demand reduction and supply reduction in a seamless whole, so that the window of opportunity created by Opal could have been utilised to reconnect a generation of youth back to their families and to the educational institutions that could prepare them for engagement with the wider community.

In fact, the Federal Government attempted to do this through it's 8 Point Plan, but it failed to capitalise on the opportunity presented by Opal because of systemic problems I will outline in later sections, including the unforeseen and uncoordinated Intervention creating chaos in the region. The four communities where the 8 Point Plan has been operating since it started in 2005 at the time of writing (mid 2008) were still without the basic youth service infrastructure despite an allocation of funds to create this infrastructure having been made in 2005, and the non-local agency that has been operating the youth services there is struggling with high staff turn-over and thus lack of capacity to engage with the communities they are attempting to service.

Thus, in this less than perfect world, CAYLUS continues to promote and implement the youth development services required in the remote communities in our region that can address the underlying issues behind inhalant abuse, and thus prevent the window of opportunity from closing in the way it did in the Pitjatjantjara lands in the 90s.

Section 2 : Opal

7. Opal becomes possible – Opal Alliance forms

The Federal Government had been negotiating with BP in relation to the company making a contribution to the welfare of Indigenous people as an act of good corporate citizenship. CAYLUS had been involved in linking representatives from BP to youth work agencies and other stakeholders. After a number of visits to the region, BP proposed they could develop a low aromatic fuel that could replace Avgas. After the formula was developed in 2004, BP had an internal quest for a name, and one of its employees came up with Opal, being a local gemstone and a short and simple branding. It was officially launched in 2005 with a government commitment to subsidise its use only in the remote communities that were using Avgas, but not in roadhouses nor in Alice Springs.



One of the Opal promotion stickers CAYLUS produced – this one in Luritja

Once we heard about Opal, our strategy became to lobby for the full roll-out of this replacement fuel. We knew how effective Avgas had been, and Opal showed even more promise as it would not damage engines in the way Avgas did. We knew it would cost more to produce, and that there would be an increased cost to the Federal Government who would have to provide a subsidy to consumers, so we knew we would have to mount a convincing argument that this was a worthwhile investment.

In 2005 the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council (NPY) contacted us about this issue. They are an association that works with women across the tri-state region of Central Australia – WA, SA and NT. We had been working with NPY since we came into existence: they were on our reference group. They represented a number of remote communities in the region from the south of Alice Springs into the north of SA and the far west of WA. Their Board, made up of Indigenous women from the region, was very concerned with petrol sniffing and this issue was always on the top of their agenda at meetings.

NPY were in communication with General Properties Trust (GPT) a large Australian corporation that owned the resorts at Yulara and Kings Canyon. Bruce Morris, one of the managers, offered to work with CAYLUS and NPY to encourage the full roll-out of Opal in the region. This was because they had seen the devastation caused by petrol sniffing and they wanted to help, but under the guidelines of the Opal roll-out at that stage, they were not allowed to stock Opal fuel at the Yulara resort, despite knowing that it was being sniffed in the region. Their involvement showed the positive aspect of corporate involvement. CAYLUS had been involved in some other corporate initiatives in the region but we had found them to be very limited in their capacity to respond appropriately to the actual needs in the region. It seemed they were more interested in getting their own ideas implemented than listening to agencies that had experience and knew what actually worked. It seemed to us they fell into the usual managerial problem of thinking decisions they made in board rooms far away and with limited understanding of the issues were going to be better than anything that people with local experience could come up with – the classic “top down” problem that has always plagued Indigenous issues.

GPT were different in their approach. They saw the potential of Opal and formed the Alliance with people from the coalface. They brought their strengths to the Alliance, which were organisational skills, government and corporate contacts and key financial support, and let NPY and CAYLUS bring our strengths into play, which were the grassroots credibility and local experience. Instead of a top down approach, they became allied with us in developing the strategies that could really work.

The three agencies had some preliminary meetings by phone conference to set our objectives, and decided to call our collaboration the Opal Alliance on the suggestion of Ray. We decided on an overall strategy which I will outline in detail below. At that stage, the Federal Government was proposing to only provide Opal to communities that already had Avgas. As stated, Opal was more expensive to produce, and the subsidy required to make it the same cost to the consumer was estimated at 33c per litre. The then Minister for Health, Tony Abbot, stated position was that the responsibility for stopping petrol sniffing was with the parents and communities. This sort of thinking was understandable but made no sense to anyone who had lived and worked in remote communities: families were worried sick by the inhalant abuse but were unable to stop it without the support of the wider community.

Another factor was that Avgas, which many communities were still using as a replacement for standard unleaded, was changing over time. Avgas is an aviation fuel, not designed to run in unleaded vehicles. It has a high lead content. Leaded petrol was phased out nationally in road use in 2000 but was still in use in aviation, though it was being phased out in that application as well. As Avgas changed, it became more aromatic and it was projected that by about 2010 it would no longer be a viable replacement fuel. As such, the Avgas option was going to become unavailable. The Federal Government was aware of this issue, and this motivated their communication with BP to develop Opal.

The Avgas study showed that replacement fuels were most effective when they replaced fuel over an entire region, making it hard to obtain intoxicating fuel. We knew from the roll-out of Avgas in Central Australia in the 90s that a piecemeal approach was doomed, and also that there had to be a follow-up of diversionary programs to capitalise on the replacement fuel strategy. We had the experience and were across the relevant research to understand these issues, and were committed to not allowing the Federal Government to make the same mistakes that had previously been made in the Pitjatjantjara region in the 90s. It is strange how often this is an issue in this region : successive waves of government bureaucrats implementing policies that have already proved to be ineffective. The inevitable road crash is then blamed on the Indigenous people who the flawed policy was applied to and the bureaucrats move on. Again, it seems this is a product of the top down approach, and reflects the fact that in federal bureaucracies the people at the top are constantly changing while the problems on the ground continue – see section 21: *Top Down problems – the CAPSSU, Intervention, Shires*. Indigenous Australians are often treated as the lab rats of the bureaucracy.

On the ground, CAYLUS and NPY had the responsibility of talking to remote communities about Opal and enlisting their support for an advocacy project that was needed to convince the Federal Government that the Opal strategy was crucial in halting and reversing the inhalant abuse that was rampant in the communities. With the permission of the remote communities, and with strict agreements never to mention names or share the database without the permission of the community involved, CAYLUS kept records of who was sniffing petrol in the NT region in which we operated. Nganapa Health kept records for the NPY communities. At that stage, we estimated there were more than 500 people sniffing petrol in the combined region, and that the numbers were growing.

The Opal Alliance had regular phone link-ups in which we worked out strategies. These strategies, which I will outline in more detail in following sections, were: a cost/benefit analysis of the hidden costs of petrol sniffing; advocacy in Canberra to key political representatives; advocating for a Coronial Inquiry in the NT; a Senate Committee Enquiry into petrol sniffing. All of these strategies were tied up in an overall media strategy that we thought had the best chance of getting the results we needed.

8. Media strategy – propose alliance with government rather than criticise

GPT brought to the Alliance the proposal that we needed to foster understanding and partnerships within government to effect change. This strategic detachment was a key reason why we eventually received the support of the Federal Government. As outlined above, previous governmental initiatives were imposed on the region with limited success. This had the effect of embittering field workers and making them angry. This detracts from their capacity to communicate a positive message in the media and in their dealings with government.

I have done so myself, despite having the intention of not straying into blame and anger: on one occasion well after the Opal roll-out had been achieved, I was caught on the hop by an ABC interview about the Intervention. I was tired and had recently been frustrated by another problem caused by lack of consultation – a remote community that desperately needed a vehicle for its youth program was being given Intervention funds to spend on their rec hall, which was already adequate and on which we had already spend thousands of capital funding that we managed from various funding sources. The Government Business Manager had not asked CAYLUS, who he knew was running the youth program for the community, but had rather asked people who did not have the “big picture” of the actual needs of the youth program. In the ABC interview, as well as the positive messages I was putting out congratulating the Federal Government for starting to realise that funding youth programs was an effective way to create a safer community for young people, I let slip my frustration at this particular decision. Of course, this was the angle the media chose to highlight, and the leader for the story was “youth worker criticises Intervention”.

We learned from this the strategic value of putting out positive messages in the media. The creation of a better alternative to existing government policy demands a more strategic approach than allowing one’s frustrations to speak out. The Opal Alliance’s media strategy was more considered and we made no such mistakes during the Opal Alliance media program.

CAYLUS and NPY capitalised on the media opportunities to send some clear and strategic messages to the public. There were many opportunities for media as at that stage : inhalant abuse was rife in the region, causing many deaths and injuries, suicides and destruction. Bad news is good news from a media perspective, and the images of gangs of petrol sniffers roaming remote communities and the streets of Alice Springs ensured national interest. We made ourselves available to the media and spoke about the realities of the situation. We had figures from various reports to quote that showed the financial cost to the taxpayer as well as the personal cost to the community. We always linked the bad news stories to the potential of Opal to fix the problem, but always with the rider that other programs would be needed as well as Opal to address the underlying issues. Because of our grassroots work, we had thousands of stories to call on to illustrate points, but knew to keep the information

concise and punchy to make it through the small windows of opportunity that media created. We did not criticise the government, but rather proposed an alliance with them to address the problem, and offered our support.

As stated, once we had a reason to get into the media, there were no shortages of media opportunities to use. However, we also decided to create some opportunities rather than wait for the next death, and to create some opportunities to put information into the public domain that supported our position – an economic analysis, a Senate Committee, a Coronial. In the following sections, I will outline these strategies and their outcomes.

GPT hired a public relations firm to assist us with the media strategy. In the beginning they were invaluable as they had media contacts through which we could release information in the form of press releases. They had some editorial input into the releases, which the Opal Alliance would write collaboratively. Over time, we developed the contacts to run the campaign ourselves, and became proficient at media releases that were targeted to make it into print. There is a skill in writing such materials. The information needs to be clear and concise, with some punchy images and some quotes from relevant people. There are even timing issues that have to be considered: a media release will not get through to press if it is competing with, for example, the Budget. Ray's media background was a crucial asset at that stage, as he knew from being on the other side of a news reporting system what the news workers were looking for to make a good story.

The Opal Alliance kept petrol sniffing in the public eye, always emphasising the potential solution as a partnership between Indigenous people and the wider community. As stated, we did not blame the government for inhalant abuse through pointing out the poverty and shocking living conditions of the Indigenous population as causal factors attributable to mistaken government policy. In the same way, we did not blame the parents or the wider Indigenous community, blaming them for not controlling their youth and providing better role models. To a great degree we did not go into the "why" of sniffing, though this was often one of the main questions we were asked. The blame game goes nowhere in the long term, whereas pointing out solutions gives options. In one interview with the ABC during the Senate Committee public hearings in Alice Springs, I said that there were a hundred ways into inhalant abuse, but there were only a couple of ways out again: supply reduction and demand reduction. In these ways, we used the media to communicate the solutions to the general public rather than simply dwell on the problems.

Another of our strategies was to allow Indigenous people to speak on every possible occasion. This is difficult for a number of reasons, including the immediate availability of commentators required by the news reporting systems, the need for concision that is difficult for Indigenous people to achieve, especially when communication that is not in their first language, and cultural imperatives regarding who can speak in relation to issues in their home communities. However, we did put Indigenous people forward where possible, and this made for some of the most

powerful media we created. The old women from the Pitjatjantjara lands were especially accomplished in the media, due to their extensive exposure over the years advocating through the NPY Women's Council. At one stage, Minister Abbott stated he was going to spend some time in the Pitjatjantjara lands to see what was really going on. The women welcomed this, stating in the media that he seemed like a "good boy" and saying they would be happy to have his help looking after the brain damaged sniffers, washing and feeding them and helping them get into and out of their wheel chairs. This sort of inclusive but powerful response made great media.

Another strategy was one we undertook with Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTAR), The Greens and Oxfam. We assisted them get a postcard campaign together, with a simple but clear message asking the Federal Government to roll Opal out regionally.



We understand that thousands of these postcards were received by the Prime Minister, which demonstrated the groundswell of support that was out there for the Opal strategy.

9. Advocacy in Canberra – non-partisan advocacy

The Opal Alliance decided on an advocacy tactic as part of the overall strategy. International research shows this sort of advocacy is one of the most effective ways of influencing public policy. As such, we arranged to take representatives from the region to Canberra to speak up for Opal and the other resources needed. Four such trips to Canberra were done and one trip with another intent just prior to the release of the Access Economics cost/benefit report – see section 10 following.

We timed our visits well, to ensure we were not competing with other major media stories. In this we received good advice from politicians we were in contact with, especially the local Labor Senator Trish Crossin and the Greens. Later, we would have a wider level of committed support to draw advice and support from – see section 11 – *the Senate Committee*.

The four Opal advocacy trips first involved discussions with our Reference Group as to who would be appropriate people to take along, then discussions with those nominated about the issues and strategies. Our position as always was non-judgemental and our intent was to seek understanding and support. The logistics of getting these representatives from their remote communities were not simple, but the commitment of the delegates ensured they always made it into Alice Springs to catch flights.

The groups consisted of CAYLUS (both Ray and myself for the first two trips, then one or the other of us for the rest) and Indigenous people from the remote communities. These included some from Yuendumu who had been involved in the success of Mt Theo, and some from other regions that were still suffering from rampant petrol sniffing, including Pastor Kantamarra and Lance McDonald, the Chair of the Papunya Community Council. Together we could give a clear view of the realities in the remote communities of the situation and propose a practical solution. The Mt Theo reps were especially valuable as they demonstrated that petrol sniffing could be overcome with the right model and the right sort of support.

It should be noted that Oxfam contributed funding for these trips to simplify discussions with our funding body about the initial trips. Once we had demonstrated the positive effect such trips could have on the Central Australian situation in terms of our profile in Parliament House and the national media, our funding body became much more accepting of them as a legitimate use of government funding. We would always meet with the Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA), our funding body, to keep them abreast of our work when we visited Canberra. Over the course of the project, we received a great deal of support from the funding body, which is one of the success factors for CAYLUS generally.

In our trips, the Opal Alliance decided on a couple of simple messages to get over to the politicians and senior public servants in relation to Opal. We had one page summaries of our position to give to people and a version to give to the press. We

booked time with strategic people from all sides of the political spectrum: Democrat, Labor, Liberal and Green. We were keeping away from party politics and trying for a broad base of support.

The message was that the region needed a wide roll-out of Opal to stop sniffing. We always added a rider that although Opal did not address the underlying issues that caused petrol abuse, it would give a window of opportunity to do so. That opportunity was just not there when the majority of the youth in the communities were sniffing petrol on a daily basis. Opal was put forward as a short-term strategy to address the crisis, with the longer term strategy being to address the underlying issues through a number of other programs that would roll out at the same time, to capitalise on the short-term Opal effect. These other programs were outlined generally, with emphasis on youth development programs in the remote communities.

As I will outline later, these crucial long-term strategies were undertaken in one part of the region by the Federal Government with limited success : the Canberra bureaucrats implementing these strategies, being unfamiliar with the region and issues, made some understandable mistakes which reduced the effect of the funding allocation to provide these crucial services – see section 16 below. However, the situation is salvageable, and CAYLUS is keen to work with other stakeholders to ensure the original good intent of the Federal Government’s commitment to addressing inhalant abuse is realised.

An important part of the message was that there was hope. We received feedback from various people during our trips that our advocacy was more positive than many such attempts to gain political support. This was in part due to our non-blaming strategy, and in part because we had innumerable good news stories about remote communities’ attempts to deal with inhalant abuse, and we had a simple and practical answer to the problems we were highlighting.

Another factor was probably that we were not proposing that the answer was in giving funding or resources to GPT, CAYLUS, NPY or any other of the advocates: there was clearly no self-interest in our advocacy.



Tristan Ray and the writer on an advocacy trip to Parliament House Canberra with Savanna Long and Gwen Brown from Ali Curung

Our Canberra meetings went well, with a sense that we were being heard and that our message getting general support. The media was great, and got the message out nationally that there was a serious problem and a possible solution. By this time, we were accomplished at using the media. We understood its needs and were practiced at giving concise but sound messages in the windows it allowed. A number of journalists had been willing to talk to us extensively so as to be able to get their head around the issue, and became allies in the communications strategy.

Our objective was to get public support and hence political support for a regional roll-out of Opal, plus support for programs that could fill the gap left by the cessation of inhalant abuse. We found people ready to listen in both the media and Parliament House.

10. The Access Economics report – speaking Treasury language

One of the strategies proposed by GPT was having a reputable economics modeling firm do a cost benefit analysis of petrol sniffing in the region we proposed as the Opal roll-out region. We knew the cost to the community of petrol sniffing was huge, but that it impacted in so many different ways that it was hard to estimate it. The obvious costs included caring for people disabled by sniffing, vandalism, police and court time, prison and hospital costs. However, there were other factors that we found hard to quantify, such as the disruption to remote community life, especially school attendance, and the many deaths attributable to inhalant abuse, either directly or indirectly. We were sure these costs added up to a substantial figure, and we hoped that if we could capture this sum we could use it to show that cost of the subsidy involved in rolling out Opal was a good investment for the taxpayer. We did not have the economic skills to do this, and also we needed a more objective analysis for credibility.

We wanted the cost benefit analysis to cover the following key areas:

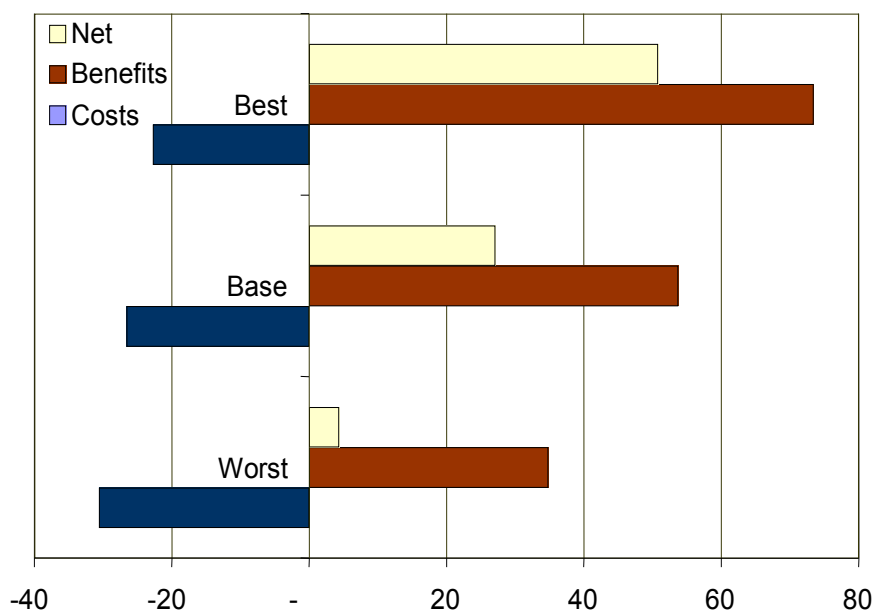
- Estimate of subsidy (based on Avgas subsidy) required for introducing Opal from 1 July 2005, with annual forecast to 2015. This will include volumes of fuel sold and the cost differential between Opal and regular petrol (the subsidy amount).
- Estimate of other costs associated with the roll out – such as promotional and educational costs
- Estimate of the short (12-months) and longer term (5-10 years) health costs associated with petrol sniffing. This would include estimating the current and future prevalence of people sniffing petrol in the central Australian region.
- Estimation (or at least discussion) of other costs such as domestic violence, theft, and break and enter, family neglect etc.

It took many months to locate a firm that had the capacity and the credibility to undertake the work. Access Economics (AE) was our eventual choice as the Federal Government had used this firm in the past and respected their professionalism. GPT paid for the study as NPY and CAYLUS did not have untied funding that could cover it.

We had a number of phone link-ups with AE, and fed them the existing data we had in the form of numerous reports and studies. They elected to capture the data for one year – 2005 – and use it as a model for the ongoing costs. AE impressed us with their diligence and their inflexibility in relation to only using figures which they could substantiate. Although this provided some frustrations as some of their estimates we thought were too conservative, such as their high estimates of fuel use in the region, they insisted that the report had to be economically unassailable in order to convince Treasury. The Opal Alliance members went through every line in the draft report

during extensive phone link-ups and gave feedback to AE on every point.

At the end of a six month process, we had a report that showed the cost to the taxpayer of petrol sniffing in 2005 as \$78.9 million. The report also estimated the cost to the Federal Government of the subsidy and the other demand reduction programs that had to be rolled out in support of the supply reduction program at \$26.6 million including the supporting strategies. AE presented three scenarios, representing the possible reductions in levels of inhalant abuse in the region that could occur if Opal and the other programs were rolled out – best case 100% reduction, base case 75% reduction and worst case 50% reduction. There were clear savings in all scenarios.



Total cost benefit analysis in millions from Opal cost benefit analysis by Access Economics 2006 page 12

In reality, the reduction once Opal was rolled out regionally was closest to the best case scenario: there is currently no ongoing inhalant abuse in remote communities but some in Alice Springs, giving an estimate of 95% reduction. According to the AE report, this means a net saving of around \$50 million per year. These savings are actually higher, as the AE subsidy estimates of fuel use at 58.5 million litres were found to be high compared to the actual amount of fuel used in the region. Another factor is that a number of vehicles that used to use unleaded have switched to Premium unleaded, in part due to the bad media around Opal during the roll out of Opal into Alice Springs – see section 116 : *Opal advertising campaign – how not to run one*. The percentage of cars using Premium has gone from 10% of the Alice

Springs market to 50%.

Once we had the report, we contacted the politicians we had been working with and the senior public servants in departments involved. We sent them copies and arranged a briefing session just prior to the public release of the document. In this way, we ensured that we were seen as allies rather than critics of the government. Our report was going to be offered as a tool with which government could make informed choices in relation to the proposed Opal strategy. Those we met in Canberra on that trip were pleased at both the positive way in which we had approached the issue, and with the irrefutable content of the report, which they assured us would greatly assist in realising the strategy. One of the Directors of AE attended key meetings to ensure the economic modeling could be explained to the satisfaction of economists.

After the Canberra briefing sessions, GPT organised the public launch in Sydney. We wanted a big media splash, and put considerable energy into making sure it would happen. A delegation of Indigenous people from the region flew down and attended. The launch was on the 15th floor of the GPT offices in the CBD of Sydney. We had large pictures backgrounding the proceedings, all positive images from our newsletters of Indigenous youth engaged in fun activities. This reflected our media position – we were not going to sensationalize the problem at this point, but rather put forward a vision of hope, with costings. At one stage, the women from NPY sang a song in Pitjantjatjara that they had written extolling the virtues of Opal. The media went well and we got national coverage.

The AE report was a crucial tactic in realising our overall strategy. Especially in the light of the conservative government's policies at that time, we had to demonstrate that the Opal strategy worked on an economic level in order to get the commitment of the public funds to the subsidy and other strategies. We also had to present the information to the wider public in a way that did not reflect badly on existing government policies. Our media strategy and consultations with government achieved these ends without compromising the core message.

Given the higher estimates of the cost of the subsidy, and the near best case result reduction in inhalant abuse, the Opal strategy must be one of the most cost effective public health initiatives ever undertaken.

The figures for the actual cost of the Opal subsidy are now available for 2006/07 and most of 2007/08. The estimate in the Access Economics Report of \$11.8 million per year proved very conservative. The actual federal subsidy required for Opal in those years were \$4.1m and a projected \$ 5.4m respectively. The region achieved near saturation by the start of the 2007/08 year, so this can be seen as an estimate of costs for years to come.

Thus, to use the actual figures instead of the estimates, the saving to the taxpayer in one year is the cost of inhalant abuse -\$78.9 million - minus the actual Opal subsidy - \$5.4. This gives a saving of \$73.5 million per year.

There are some other costs not picked up in the above, such as a distribution subsidy, and the ongoing cost of care for people disabled through inhalant abuse. The overall message however is clear: a strategy that has support in the region can succeed in preventing substance abuse and save the taxpayer from paying for endless damage control. It will probably be advantageous to remind the public of the success of this supply reduction initiative, especially in the light of the Northern Territory Emergency Response's attempts to address some of the other chronic substance abuse issues in the region.

11. Senate Committee – how to start one and what to expect

We made contact with the Greens in 2004. Senator Bob Brown was interested in the issue and came up to Central Australia to visit some remote communities. We arranged a trip in which he saw Yuendumu and Willowra and spoke to community members, camping out with local youth and elders halfway between those remote communities. When he returned to the Senate, he moved that a Senate Enquiry be undertaken into petrol sniffing as an issue. Because of the political realities, his motion was not successful, but a motion for a similar Enquiry made by Liberal Senator Scullion on 14 September, 2005 was successful and a Committee was formed to look at inhalant abuse in Central Australia. It was proposed by Senator Scullion as follows :

I move:

(1) That the Senate:

- (a) notes that despite the efforts of communities and governments, the problem of petrol-sniffing remains widespread and endemic in remote Aboriginal communities;*
- (b) recognises the efforts of local communities and work underway between the federal, NT, WA and SA governments to work in collaboration to implement a comprehensive strategy to tackle petrol sniffing.*
- (c) notes that an additional \$6 million over 2 years has recently been announced by the Federal Government to expand the roll-out of OPAL petrol in the Central Desert region and that total expenditure for OPAL subsidies is \$19.6 million over 4 years;*
- (d) notes that the government is considering a limited supply of OPAL petrol in Alice Springs for residents of affected indigenous communities and for people visiting those communities;*
- (e) calls on the government , should it proceed with the limited supply of OPAL in Alice Springs, to work with petrol retailers and communities to develop a code of practice and an education strategy in relation to responsible trading;and*
- (f) notes that supply of non-sniffable OPAL petrol can only be one part of a solution to petrol-sniffing.*

(2) That the Senate:

(2) That the following matters be referred to the Community Affairs Reference Committee for inquiry and report by Wednesday 9 November 2005

- (a) the effectiveness of existing laws and policing with respect to petrol sniffing in affected Indigenous communities;*
- (b) the effectiveness of diversionary initiatives and community level activities;*

(c) lessons that can be learned from the success some communities have had in reducing petrol sniffing including the impact of non-sniffable OPAL petrol

The Senate Committee was made up of representatives from all four political parties : Democrat, Liberal, Labor and Green. One of its first acts was to extend the time of the Enquiry to mid 2006. The Committee took submissions and visited a number of places throughout Australia to gather evidence and hear from interested parties. In May 2006 CAYLUS and NPY both put submissions in to the Committee – ours is on the CAYLUS website, and all can be seen on the Commonwealth Government website.

CAYLUS gave evidence in Alice Springs, and also were part of the group helping with the logistics of getting the Committee members out to Mt Theo outstation, which was visited as an example of a successful community-based inhalant abuse reduction program. The long drive in the Troop Carrier gave us plenty of time to talk informally with the Committee members, who were all very well informed about the issues through the research they had done.

The Senate Enquiry created another good media opportunity in which we could push the Opal Alliance's vision of an Opal roll-out throughout the geographic region of Central Australia as outlined in the Access Economics report. Our proposal included providing Opal to communities that had not been on Avgas, roadhouses and other commercial interests in Alice Springs. As per our overall strategy, we told true stories about the situation in the remote communities without blaming the government or the parents of those sniffing. Without diminishing the problems, we told positive stories that indicated there was hope and a way forward if there could be a partnership between Indigenous people and the wider community to address the issues.

In June 2006, CAYLUS put in a supplementary submission. At that stage, Opal had been rolled out to a number of communities and there had been a substantial drop in petrol sniffing as a consequence. The supplementary report gave figures from the NPY region that showed inhalant abuse dropping to nothing in the wake of Avgas, but slowly returning to the same rate as before over a two year period. We hoped the Opal strategy would not suffer a similar fate.

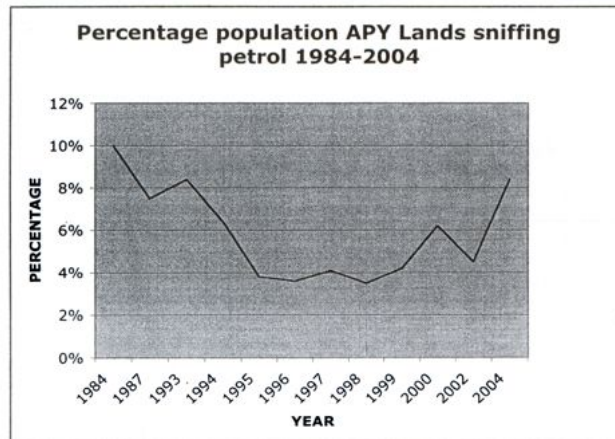


Figure 4 Percentage population sniffing petrol 1984 - 2004

from “Petrol Sniffing and Preventive Interventions on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands” by S.J. Roper August, 1998 (p57-58)

We wanted to flag the fact that the situation of the initial success of Opal mirrored the initial success of the roll-out of Avgas in the 90s, and to remind the Committee that on that occasion the gains were not realised in the long term because no demand reduction programs were rolled out to compliment the fuel replacement program.

When it was released in late 2006, the Senate Report unanimously recommended that Opal be rolled out across the region along with other programs to address the demand reduction side of the equation. It is my understanding that it has been the only inter-party committee that has been unanimous in its recommendations.

When the Report was released in the Senate, the Opal Alliance attended the Senate Chamber Room with a delegation from the remote communities. The Senate was very encouraging to members of the Opal Alliance and the media surrounding it made a good impression nationally. The main spokesperson for our delegation was Lance McDonald, the President of Papunya Council, who spoke very respectfully about the people involved in sniffing. On the next day in the Parliament, then Health Minister Abbott retold some of the stories McDonald made public on that occasion as examples of communities and government acting together to effect change.

The members of the Committee have been allies to CAYLUS since this time, and have given us support on many occasions. We always make time to brief them when we are in Canberra, as they are the subset of people in parliament who really know about the issues. As stated, we did not and do not play party politics in relation to our alliances: we have the big picture in mind and will work with anyone who has something to offer.

12. NT Coronial Inquiries – a media circus

After the two recent Coronial Inquiries in South Australia about petrol sniffing, the time was right to have the NT Coroner look into the many deaths from petrol sniffing. The last NT Inquiry had been held in 1998. We knew there was some public interest in this issue and wrote to the Coroner with a list of twenty people who had died from petrol sniffing or related causes, asking that there be a Coronial to examine these deaths. The Coroner Greg Cavenagh wrote back saying he would look into three deaths only; to look into more would complicate the proceedings without giving any more information than could be gleaned from an exhaustive study of a smaller number of incidents. A date was set for the Inquest in August 2005.

The Opal Alliance put out a press release welcoming this initiative, stating in one part *“The former NT Coroner Warren Donald made numerous recommendations in 1998, following his inquiry into the death of a fourteen-year-old sniffer, but little has been done in response. In the Northern Territory alone, 120 sniffers are likely to acquire brain damage in the next few years. According to the Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services, the average health cost of caring for each of them is \$200,000 per annum. For some, it could be as high as \$750,000 a year.”*

Coroner Donald’s recommendations in 1998 came after looking into the death of a young Pitjantjatjara man who had been dropped at Ilpurla rehab outstation by his family. The young man had been intoxicated at the time, and when he “came down” and started to become aware of his circumstances, he smashed a pane of glass in rage, severing a major artery in his arm. He died before adequate medical attention could stop the bleeding. Although many of his suggestions were not acted on, one of his recommendations was the establishment of an organisation like CAYLUS to keep attention on the issue and develop community based responses.

CAYLUS and NPY put in submissions to the Coronial. Ours is on our website, and outlines some of the history of inhalant abuse and other issues that impacted on the two communities in which the deaths occurred: Willowra and Mutitjulu.

The Mutitjulu information contained some of the story of one of the young men who had died. He had tried to get off petrol sniffing on previous occasions, but had relapsed when he returned to Mutitjulu, where there was entrenched petrol misuse and few other options available. We made the point that rehabilitation was doomed unless resources were put into the communities to which people would inevitably return.

The Willowra information outlined how that community was de-funded by the NT Government approx 10 years prior to the death in question, resulting in a paucity of resources to address the inhalant abuse, which was rife amongst the youth there. We also made the point that the young man who died was not a regular user – it was

allegedly his first inhalant experience. This supported our position that there was no safe level of petrol sniffing, and that every time anyone put a petrol can to their face, they might not survive.

We pushed for a comprehensive Opal roll out in the following recommendation :

Recommendation 12 – Roll out of Opal fuel

12 (a) That the Commonwealth Government subsidise the comprehensive regional roll out of Opal fuel in the Central Australian Cross Border region.

12 (b) That the NT Government ensure the implementation of the proposed Opal package, being the replacement of sniffable fuel in the region with Opal fuel in the area from just north of Coober Pedy to just west of Mt Isa, to just south of Tennant Creek to Laverton - a geographic area that contains the largest cluster of sniffers in Australia.

12 (c) Where there are feasibility and supply issues that the Federal Government meaningfully engages with State and Territory governments, community organisations and corporate stakeholders in order to resolve these issues.

We also recommended demand reduction strategies in the remote communities. We proposed a youth development model based on our observations of successful youth development programs in the region.

Recommendation 7 – Provision of youth services and infrastructure

That the NT and Australian Federal Governments recognise youth services such as recreation, leadership and community development programs are essential services and commit to a timeframe by which at least one Territory funded youth worker position will be available in every remote community. That this roll out of youth services is complimented by a roll out of relevant infrastructure, i.e. housing and youth centres.

Recommendation 8 – Regional coordinating body for youth services

That this provision of youth services is supported by a regional coordinating body. Where there is not local capacity to deliver and manage a program that an outside service agency facilitates the program.

Recommendation 9 – Youth workforce development service

That 3 year funding is provided for a Central Australian youth workforce

development service.

This model was eventually taken up by the Federal Government in their 8 Point Plan, but it was rolled out in a way that did not realise it's potential – see section 16 below.

This Coronial also received a submission from Gregory Andrews, a Federal Government officer who had been working in Mutitjulu for approx one year prior to the Inquest. His submission was strongly in favour of Opal plus a number of other initiatives, including increased police presence. Andrews gave a very emotional account of the difficulties faced by the residents of Mutitjulu, and wept in the stand while giving evidence.

Early in the Inquest, the NT Government tried to convince the Coroner that looking at the demand reduction strategies we proposed was beyond the scope of the Inquiry, but the Coroner did not agree. This was interesting as in the next Coronial Inquiry about a petrol sniffing death in 2008, the same Coroner did not chose to comment on the youth program issue.

For the Opal Alliance, the Coronial Inquiry was a good opportunity to push the message that Opal was a realistic part of a program to stop petrol sniffing. The media was very interested in the story, as it contained the right mix of horror and hope to make a good story. When the Inquest was sitting in Mutitjulu, a petrol sniffer came into the Courtroom with a can against his face. This became the photo on the front page of *The Australian* on the next day, and it made the issue very real for the wider community. The Opal Alliance put out a number of press releases, and spoke on every opportunity to the press on our agreed position.

The Coroner recommended the following:

1. That suitably qualified youth workers be employed in remote Aboriginal communities that are recruited by professional agencies.
2. That the Australian government rollout Opal universally across the Central Australian region.
3. That immediate action is taken to provide adequate treatment and rehabilitation facilities for petrol sniffers in Central Australia.
4. That the Australian governments provide adequate resources to remote indigenous communities to enable members to function in good health and live with dignity, which Australian citizens are entitled.

Such recommendations have no real force, with governments able to simply report that they are looking into them while the media spotlight is on the issue. However, we understood these limitations and capitalised on the opportunity to inform the general public about petrol sniffing as an issue, and to put out the very simple message that its

could be stopped with Opal and some demand reduction strategies. We are convinced that the national media interest and coverage influenced the political will to address this issue, which was our objective.

It is interesting to see how many of the recommendations made by both Coroner Donald and Coroner Cavanaugh have been followed over time. Despite the lack of capacity to enforce their recommendations, the findings are a distillation of the wisdom available at the time, and can act as a guide for further actions.

13. Community responses – sniffing being stopped at the community level ; outbreaks and responses

Before the start of the fuel replacement strategies (Avgas and, since 2005, Opal), remote Indigenous communities had already started to take a stand against petrol sniffing. When sniffing had been the dominant youth activity, it had been impossible to stop it, but once CAYLUS started having public meetings and forming action groups from 2002, the concerned families had the opportunity to get together and talk about their dissatisfaction with the inhalant abuse. The will to act was there, it just needed the opportunity. Before Opal became a possibility, these meetings had resulted in the development of local strategies that CAYLUS helped to mobilize with community members. These were varied, as the circumstances of each community made different options possible.

It was clear from these meetings that people were very concerned and willing to try anything that seemed appropriate. The local community meetings often ran themselves. CAYLUS would publicise a meeting time and place, talk to anyone who seemed interested beforehand and make sure some amplification equipment was available if needed. We would make a short statement that we wanted to talk about how to stop the sniffing, and open the discussion to the people there. During the discussion that followed, we would offer information when it seemed appropriate, explain various strategies that had been tried in other places if asked, correct misinformation where we could, and form action groups around particular proposals that seemed to have support and a chance of success. We emphasised that we were looking at what we could do right now, as well as planning for the future. This often resulted in actions being taken after meetings, like key people being sent to other family or to one of the two Indigenous rehab outstations, or a submission being written to the small grant section of NT Health.

On another level, these meetings constituted public statements that the sniffing was not OK and a stand had been taken against it by the wider community. This was an important position for the community to take and communicate in a public forum. In part this is needed due to the underground nature of the petrol sniffing. Usually, when sniffing starts in a community, it tends flourish in the late night amongst youth who are not expected to be under close family control. A small group sniffing late at night can become a large group within a few weeks, at which time it becomes well known, but by then, too widespread to take any immediate action in relation to each of the individuals involved. Communities can suddenly find themselves with a large proportion of the youth abusing petrol. Individuals and families might be concerned, but without a public meeting, the issue stays within the family system, which, in the context of these very traditional people's lifestyles and culture, is not well adapted to the social control required to live in a settled community. Once the issue becomes a public one, the opportunity arises to get help from outside the immediate family, and to argue within the family that there is a mandate to take actions to address the petrol sniffing.

Being part of these meetings indicated that there was some truth in the late 1980s anti-sniffing program called the Healthy Aboriginal Lifestyle Team (HALT). The HALT model proposed that the local community did have cultural and social resources that had the potential to stop the sniffing. However, this has been interpreted at times as meaning there is no need to support remote communities, as they “should” be able to do it themselves. The reality is that systematic support from beyond the immediate community is needed to enact some of the strategies devised. This created the potential for a powerful partnership, with CAYLUS staff and local people collaborating on agreed goals.

In 2005 Opal became a possibility, and the Opal Alliance provided the support required for Indigenous people to advocate in partnership to get Opal rolled out regionally. The Indigenous people who took an active role in the advocacy were part of a wider group who had been working alongside NPY and CAYLUS for years enacting smaller scale strategies. They were representatives of a community-based movement that was committed to stopping petrol sniffing. It was this wider group that have played an important part in stopping the sniffing post-Opal.

Once the majority of the sniffers in the remote communities in the region had given up regular inhalant abuse due to lack of easy access to standard unleaded fuel, it became possible for families and communities to take some positive action. This took the form of community meetings in some cases, family pressure in others, but throughout the region in the post-Opal era, it was no longer possible to sniff petrol without drawing a lot of community pressure. Once people had lived without the sniffing, they were keenly motivated not to let it come back.

In CAYLUS, we heard of a number of outbreaks in which the community response was immediate and strong, and the message was clearly put out there that sniffing was no longer going to be tolerated. In one community the immediate success of the post-sniffing football team, who won the regional competition, told a clear story to locals of how much sniffing had been holding back the young men of the community. To sniff was now a “shame job” in a community where previously all the youth of the community participated. This was the sort of narrative the community was now proposing – “*we don’t sniff here any more*” and it “*it held us back*”.

The key message from this history is that Opal by itself would not have had the level of success without the community development work. If this fuel replacement strategy was to be introduced in other parts of the world, the development of a staged plan to introduce Opal could try to replicate this process. Simply replacing Opal at the bowlers would waste the opportunity to engage the community in developing a health initiative that has a good chance of working. The visible success of the anti-sniffing strategy could be celebrated and the goodwill in the community could become the basis of addressing other health issues.

The Opal Alliance is still trying to complete the prevention strategy at this stage, and thus have not fully engaged in a strategy to test this theory, though we have started a

low key plan to address alcohol abuse in partnership with NPY and other players. We have noted a strong upsurge in the feeling of political power in the communities when we talk about sniffing these days. Their experience has been that there was a big problem which the communities themselves sorted out with the help of various agencies.

The Opal Alliance received an award for Prevention from the Australian Drug Council in 2007 for its work on the Opal campaign.



Members of the Opal Alliance with the Prevention Award

14. 8 Point Plan – the Federal response to VSA in CA

As outlined above, the Federal Government started a program in September 05 to address the petrol sniffing, in part responding to the advocacy from the Opal Alliance. It was called the 8 Point Plan, and on paper it looked like it might address some of the underlying issues as well as support the Opal roll-out OATSIH was undertaking. The 8 points were :

- Consistent legislation
- Appropriate levels of policing
- Further roll-out of non-sniffable petrol
- Alternative activities for young people
- Treatment and respite facilities
- Communication and education strategies
- Strengthening and supporting communities
- Evaluation

It had an initial commitment of \$20 million and was going to cover the central region of Australia, being parts of the NT, WA and SA. It was clearly designed by people who had never been to the region, and had little idea about the issues on the ground. It was not until CAYLUS told the Senate in February, 2006 about Finke (Aputula) community missing out, despite being a Pitjantjatjara community in the Southern NT, that Finke was included in the 8 Point Plan region.

The 8 Point Plan was implemented in the chaos that characterized Central Australia under the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) and creation of the Shires over the next few years. It was supposed to implement strategies across the region, but the WA and SA Governments pulled out – the NT did not have this option due to its limited legislative capacity as a Territory. Consequently, the 8 Point Plan was a Federal strategy that concentrated on four NT communities. Although this was a shame, it meant the four communities remaining within the effective control of the Federal Government were allocated the full amount of the original funding which had been meant to fund responses in two other regions as well as the NT. On the down side, this level of funding - \$3 million per year to run youth programs in four communities - meant a national provider (Mission Australia) became interested and won the contract over a regional provider who had local experience and people on the board of directors. It has also committed the Federal Government to an ongoing high level of funding for those communities – a good thing as long as similar levels of funding are made available to other communities that are equally deserving.

In 2005 the 8 Point Plan created the Central Australian Petrol Sniffing Strategy Unit (CAPSSU), which is located in the Commonwealth Building in Alice Springs.

CAPSSU had carriage of the implementation of the Plan.

One of their main roles is to co-ordinate tri-state efforts to deal with inhalant abuse through synchronising laws and police efforts. With SA and WA pulling out, this role became impossible.

A Substance Abuse Intelligence Desk was established in Alice Springs under the NTER to co-ordinate police intelligence one cross-border drug supply. This has been effective in detecting cannabis smuggling and has had no impact on inhalant issues. It does not involve itself in local drug matters, only those that involve cross border activity.

CAPSSU was responsible for rolling out youth program infrastructure : as at mid 2008 there were no youth worker houses nor recreation halls built in the four communities. Youth workers were working together and sharing accommodation that is only suitable for short-term stays. These buildings were allocated to the NT branch of the 8 Point Plan by the Federal Government when Woomera Detention Centre was decommissioned. They have been refurbished, but workers have personal space of approx only 2 meters by three 3 meters. This contributed to the worker burn-out outlined below.

Through a tender process, Mission Australia has been given the southern communities contract for three years at a cost of approx \$9 million with another \$3 million being provided for infrastructure. The implementation of the impossible brief they committed to in their tender document has burned out almost the entire Central Australia staff of MA, and has provided patchy services to the four communities. We are hoping that some recent appointments of people from the region with some experience and proven skills will assist in the service provision. We understand Mission Australia was not able to meet its reporting requirements, but that the Commonwealth is not acting on this. We consider MA has done their best, but that the flawed tender system allowed caused them to unknowingly promise undeliverable outcomes. This and the lack of housing and rec halls contributed to the patchy services delivered during this time. Rec halls are needed because there are no public spaces in the vast majority of remote communities. In one community where we work there are no undercover spaces and during summer you can fry an egg on the outdoor climbing gear at the school. Air conditioned facilities are essential to run any activities in this region.

School holiday programs in the region are now partly administered by the CAPSSU, with CAYLUS picking up the slack in the many communities where CAPSSU services are not provided – note: geographic location within the extended 8 Point Plan region does not guarantee services from CAPSSU, and location outside this designated region does not preclude services being provided. It appears the services

are being provided at particular communities for the convenience of the CAPSSU. We have not been consulted about this planning, and have had to work around CAPSSU rather than with it. In 2008 our planning for the school holidays was delayed because CAPSSU had suggested in August 2008 they would be providing funding to CAYLUS to run interim youth services in the Western Macdonnells Shire. This had happened previously in the southern region, with CAYLUS providing youth services in the four Southern communities before the tender was released for ongoing provision of youth services. CAPSSU did not go ahead with this plan and a tender was arranged instead. The tender was eventually decided the week the school holidays started. However, one month before, CAYLUS decided we had to start booking holiday programs without knowing what the outcome of this funding would be. The reality of these services is that they require a few months lead time to organise properly. The reality of CAPSSU is that their internal systems are incapable of acting within timeframes that allow for strategic effective actions.

CAPSSU is being evaluated from without and from within, and will also be subject to scrutiny by the Senate Committee, which reformed in 2008 to check on progress re their 2006 recommendations. It is a shame that CAPSSU did not meet with the Senate Committee when it visited Alice Springs to gather evidence. We hope the issues surrounding their service provision will be looked into and hopefully improved on. This is especially significant as the Commonwealth has given the CAPSSU funding for more infrastructure and youth program delivery for the extended 8 Point Plan region. Mistakes are part of the gig, but learning from them is the vital condition rather than taking the easy way out and pretending nothing went wrong and that the services are rolling out perfectly, or blaming the service providers or the communities if plans are not working. This avoidance of responsibility for failure is the essential contradiction at the heart of the public service, and the reason why problems seem to never be resolved, especially in Indigenous affairs.

15. Opal advertising campaign – how not to run one

An allocation of \$800k was made under the 8 Point Plan in 2005 for an advertising campaign, ideally to be launched before Opal was rolled out through the region. CAPSSU had carriage of this part of the strategy. CAPSSU elected not to go through a tender scheme and awarded a contract without any local consultation. An advertising program was developed with some input from CAYLUS and other agencies, but eventually the program was not allowed to be run in time for the Opal roll-out. The advertising campaign had to be cleared by a government committee in Canberra, and this process proved very lengthy. In September 2006, motorists in Alice Springs found themselves with no option but to put Opal fuel in their cars, having had no education as to what Opal was nor why they were being forced to use it. This resulted in a public backlash that caused Opal to be withdrawn from use and created a deep sense of mistrust in the general public that seems to be still evident in Alice Springs and the region. The campaign was eventually run in February 2007 coinciding with the next release of Opal in Alice Springs.

The Opal Alliance itself ran some advertising in December 2006 after the initial backlash and before the second implementation of Opal in Alice Springs. Our campaign included newspaper advertising, radio and a film festival. We offered in a letter to FaHCSIA to undertake any future Opal advertising, but the Department elected to continue with their own processes.

OPAL FUEL ADVERTISING SUPPLEMENT

Opal no worries: bush mechanic

Longtime Central Australian mechanic Jon Hermawan, who has worked on Opal fuel powered cars and a large variety of plant machinery for nearly two years, says he recommends its use.

"Cars run well on it and its use has reduced petrol sniffing in the region," says Mr Hermawan, the mechanic at Kintore community, west of Alice Springs.

Opal fuel has been the sole unleaded fuel used there since March 2005.

Mr Hermawan says the arguments in the media criticising Opal fuel at the local level are merely one mechanic's opinion against another, and should not be taken as fact.

"None of us have put in the formal research like BP have to seriously evaluate the fuel and remove speculation," he says.

"Companies like BP don't throw a fuel out onto the market, putting themselves at risk without thoroughly checking it out."

Mr Hermawan says Opal is a standard unleaded fuel and that using it makes very little difference to the running of a vehicle.

"I have a 1985 Holden Commodore which runs on LPG and unleaded petrol, and have had to make no modifications whatsoever in order to run it on Opal."

"The only changes needed were the usual carburettor adjustments required for the initial LPG conversion."

He says that there have often been scares with the introduction of new technologies.

"Some of the comments and cases I have seen in the media have been extreme and likely to be the result of poorly tuned and maintained cars and not Opal fuel use."

Mr Hermawan encourages other mechanics to better inform themselves.

"Mechanics around Alice Springs should inform themselves properly in relation to this, rather than blaming every problem on Opal fuel as an easy way out."

"BP are offering training to mechanics in relation to Opal fuel and I encourage mechanics to attend these seminars and fully inform themselves."

Mr Hermawan, who runs mechanics programs for young men in the community, supports Opal fuel as a way of stopping petrol sniffing.

"It's been drastically reduced to almost no instances in Kintore in the last five to six months," he says.

"There has also been a reduction in crime and vandalism associated with sniffing."

Part of our pro-Opal campaign run in late 06

16. Diversionary programs - problems with tendering services in remote communities

One consequence of the concentration of resources after WA and SA pulled out of the 8 Point Plan was the attraction of one of the big players into Central Australia – Mission Australia tendered for the youth program provision in the four communities (Mutitjulu, Imanpa, Docker River, Aputula), succeeding despite a lower cost local community-based provider also tendering with a more realistic program. I understand the tender process was all above board, but it displayed a lack of local wisdom in its choice. I wonder if the choice would have gone that way if the tender board had any local knowledge to draw on, or if anyone in the decision making process had any experience of delivering these sort of services to that demographic. The rumors in the region were that Mission Australia was going to get the tender as soon as it was announced because of the relationship between MA and the Federal Government at that time. It still came as a disappointment, given the opportunity this investment of funds represented to develop local capacity.

CAYLUS had been running interim youth services in the four communities from December '06 to June '07, and we offered our expertise and local knowledge to Mission Australia when it took over with no reservations: we wanted them to deliver the best possible service and were prepared to help in any way possible. We had some access to MA, which we followed up as much as possible, but they did not appear capable of accessing our help systematically.

The issue reflects on a systemic problem: as someone once said *“it’s much easier to offer solutions to problems when you know very little about them”*. This is particularly the case when the problems are embedded in a different culture. Why don’t Aboriginal people simply act like whitefellas? It takes some time working with Indigenous people and communities to come to understand what is going on. This knowledge then influences one’s decisions and understandings, and leads to improved outcomes. Mission Australia and the people deciding the tender did not have this specialist knowledge when they made their decisions.

MA probably thought they were designing a state of the art program when they put their tender together. They probably looked at Mt Theo and other successful models and offered their outcomes based on this information. What they did not factor in is that these outcomes came from a lengthy and deliberate community development process. It reminds me of a story I heard about the Red Army taking St Petersburg. The soldiers from the Steppes had never seen plumbing before, and some pulled taps from the walls of the palace and took them home to their homes and mounted them in their walls. They were surprised that no water would come out. This is analogous to Mission Australia thinking they can jump through the community development process and immediately deliver the outcomes that Mt Theo delivers after having

been in operation for twelve years.

Consequently the more realistic model proposed by the local organisation, NPY Women's Council, was not approved. I am not impugning any malice on the part of Mission Australia – they simply bit off more than they could chew when they took the contract on, and have been trying to achieve the impossible.

Mission Australia's program is also being evaluated and as such the flaws might be identified. As stated, CAYLUS is willing to work closely with MA, but in the past this has not been possible, in part because of the top down management of such large organisations. However, their recent appointment of people with regional knowledge and experience is a positive move, and we are continuing to offer support wherever possible.

17. Casework strategies

After Opal, it became crucial to keep a close eye on the chronic inhalant abusers. Over the years, we had come to know who they were, and after Opal, the numbers were not increasing the way they had been before. CAYLUS has one caseworker, with the two Community Development workers occasionally picking up the overflow. The caseworker, as outlined above, was a crucial strategy to keep casework from flooding our agenda in the early days. Now, casework was the way we would keep sniffing from returning.

We knew that unchallenged sniffing resulted in increasing numbers of abusers in a short timeframe. To prevent resurgence in inhalant abuse, we now had a definite caseload of chronic sniffers to which to concentrate. It should be remembered that premium petrol is still readily available in Alice Springs along with other inhalants, so there is a real danger of people accessing them in Alice Springs and dealing inhalants to remote communities in the way alcohol is.

We have always had a very friendly attitude to inhalant abusers. Our office is a welcoming place for them. We knew that lecturing people about the dangers etc was ineffective, and a good way to ensure there was little or no contact with this client group. Our strategy has been to be helpful to them, gently encouraging them to consider giving up, and building on opportunities to either get them to a less risky remote community or outstation environment or reduce some of the risk factors in their town environment. This “gently gently” approach has not stopped us informing the police whenever we had some knowledge of illegality, or of inhalant abuse, especially the long “sniffing parties” that happen regularly in some town camp locations. Nor has it stopped us advocating for Mandatory Treatment Orders under the VSAP Act for this group (see next section), and providing the casework support for these placements, especially after release from mandated treatment.

18. Rehab support – Ilpurla, Ipolera, Intjartnama, Mt Theo – town services – Bush Mob, DASA.

Each of the three Indigenous outstations deserves their own book. Firstly, I will outline the two rehab outstations that have operated till recently, but eventually had to close down.

Intjartmana was a family outstation that operated effectively for many years, but failed to operate so well after the key elder passed away. It's funding was eventually withdrawn and it no longer plays a large part on inhalant service provision in the region. When it was operating, it tried hard to provide a place where people could get away from their addictions.

Ipolera was a similar story. It operated for a few years, providing a good service, but several factors meant the elders running it elected to stop providing a service for inhalant clients in 2007. In part this was caused by the NT Education Department's withdrawal of a visiting teacher who used to drive from a nearby larger community and teach the youth who had been placed at the small outstation by family or by the Welfare. Once this service was not provided, the families had no way of keeping the youth engaged, and they eventually became a management problem that the old people could not handle. CAYLUS attempted to dissuade the NT Education Department from this action, but were unsuccessful.

Mt Theo is the outstation end of a holistic substance abuse/community development program that has been running in the Warlpiri region for 14 years. It's success is something we have learned from, and many of the models we implement are derived from their program. Its only program limitation is that it can only take Warlpiri people, as the system it used uses employs specific cultural resources. The Warlpiri are the largest tribe in the region, so this limitation does not compromise the overall service delivery as long as Ilpurla continues to operate – see below.

Ilpurla is another family run rehab outstation that has been operating in various forms for more than 20 years. With Mt Theo, it is the key to placing people under the VSAP Act for Mandatory Treatment. Placements in town-based agencies have not worked : the client group, not known for their self-control, just walks out after a couple of days. Ilpurla is a safe place where people can dry out and participate in some low-key cattle and station work.



Barry Abbott at Ilpurla by McFarland – drawing used in community education program about Mandatory Treatment under the VSAP Act

Ilpurla receives OATSIH funding and has just had a \$2 million upgrade in facilities. Despite this, it struggles to do the administration required to operate, and CAYLUS has undertaken key administrative roles to assist them. It's core funding is not enough to cover it's needs, but CAYLUS has negotiated with Federal Attorney Generals for funding that keeps the service happening. To quote Barry Abbott, the manager *"CAYLUS are the only bastards that have ever helped us."* An overstatement, but CAYLUS' work has been crucial to the continuation of this key inhalant service. It is still not stable and needs systematic support.

We are surprised that Ilpurla has not received any support from the 8 Point Plan : at time of writing in mid 2008 no-one from CAPSSU has ever visited, despite it's key role in providing rehabilitation. CAPSSU has provided a great deal of support to Mt Theo, but none to Ilpurla. A town-based agency received \$2 million for an upgrade from 8 Point Plan funds on condition they make 10 beds available for inhalant abusers and support people, both for voluntary and mandated patients. Despite their willingness to take people, the agency has had a 100% failure rate with the Mandated group to date. CAYLUS could have predicted this outcome if anyone had asked us. Most town-based rehab facilities have the same problem. The impulsive and addicted

client group just walks out.

19. The VSAP Act – great potential marred by lengthy delays



The first Management Area declared under the VSAP Act

When the inhalant abuse reached a fever pitch in Alice Springs after the roll-out of Comgas Avgas into the Western Desert in 2003/04, the NT Government brought in the Volatile Substance Abuse Prevention Act 2005 (VSAP), which created a legislative base for a number of actions. These included the power to gazette remote and urban Aboriginal communities as “dry” in relation to inhalants, and creating a process by which a Mandatory Treatment Order can be issued for an individual. The process for issue was originally lengthy and full of unnecessary delays, including an inexplicable 28 day pause by the Department of Justice between the Health Department approving the issue of the Order and the Court system being engaged to issue warrants to get the individual before a Magistrate for consideration of issue of a two month Order.

The first Mandatory Treatment Order was issued 18 months after the initial request. A number of other delays and problems emerged in the implementation of the Act which CAYLUS, other stakeholders and the NT Health Department have successfully addressed. This initial slowness is to be expected in such a radical piece of legislation. Our work has included educating Health Department officials, who play a crucial part in the process in relation to rehab and casework, in the need to implement Mandatory Orders when mostly Health Department people are uncomfortable with non-voluntary treatment. The CAYLUS position is simplified because we are

concerned both with individuals, who can die on any occasion they take up the can, and with the safety of the community in which the sniffing occurs.

There was a review of the processes in 2008/09 which resulted in the delays being shortened and we are now happy to report that the legislation is nearly achieving its great potential. It should be noted that the Order does not engage the criminal justice system, even in breach. It created an effective way of addressing addiction without criminalisation, and as such, could become the model for other legislation in the drug and alcohol arena.

I should state that there is still some fine-tuning to do : there were a number of people who are subject to VSAP Orders who were sniffing petrol in a town camp as I wrote the above. These individuals had left the rehab outstation where they were ordered to remain, and the authorities notified at once. A warrant was eventually issued that got them back before a Court for breach of Order and sent back to the outstation. The delay was about three weeks, and the sniffing in the town camp attracted a number of other young people into a lengthy binge. The delays are purely administrative, and are endangering both the individuals and the communities in which they are sniffing. We have found the NT Department of Health to be committed to improving the legislation and they have always sought our opinion and welcomed our feedback as to the operation of the legislation on the ground.

20. Top Down problems – the CAPSSU, Intervention, Shires

As can be seen from the above, CAYLUS is of the opinion that there should be more consultation with stakeholders in the region before implementation of public policies. It can be frustrating from the grass roots to see the waste of resources that takes place without this informed consultation. There was a deliberate exclusion of what was called “vested interests” but which could have more accurately been described as stakeholders - people who knew what had happened before, what was happening now, and who had an ongoing commitment to the issues and region. We know the safety of children could have been vastly improved through the implementation of the youth development programs in remote communities at a fraction of the cost of the NTER.

The CAPSSU, also being evaluated, has demonstrated a similar lack of consultation. CAYLUS had expected to be consulted about inhalant substance abuse issues and our opinions sought. Instead, the CAPSSU have followed their own agenda, and we have found out about some of their actions only after the event.

It appears a system characteristic that people within the Public Service are encouraged to move around through the structure of their administrative hierarchies. CAYLUS is always trying to educate public servants about basic issues, knowing we will be doing it all again next year or next month. So many of the public servants who are in charge of inhalant and other programs that impact on remote communities have never lived in a remote community, never worked with traditional people, never even seen a petrol sniffer in action. Without consultation with services like CAYLUS, how can they hope to understand the issues and act strategically? I know there are excellent people within these bureaucracies, but the systems controlling these excellent people seem to preclude their effective operation, reducing their efforts to what Tess Lea in her book on the NT Health Department “Bureaucrats and bleeding hearts” describes as “dynamic inertia”. The operation of policy in this frame work seems to dictate what can be thought by these operatives, replicating approaches that have been proved ineffective for decades and calling endlessly for more co-ordination as an alternative to rethinking the basic models of engagement, which are clearly flawed. It may be that these are systemic reasons why government acting alone is incapable of being a responsive and flexible agency for community change, even when faced by issues that have enormous destructive capacity such as substance abuse.

The Shires are another new factor in the Aboriginal domain that is happening as I write. The local community Councils in the NT have been disincorporated and their assets absorbed by a regional Shire system. This has been on the cards for a number of years, and is being rolled out despite opposition from the communities. This creates uncertainty, and might strip the agencies on the ground of resources that are redirected to the Shire corporate body, which will have a new layer of bureaucracy to support. CAYLUS will work with the Shires to support the youth programs that became the responsibility of the Shires as of 1 July, 2008. At the time of writing this section, in late June 2008, the Macdonnell Shire still did not know if they have funding for a

position to manage the youth programs that they were to be inheriting in two weeks.

With the passing of the legislation that created the Shires, the NT Government created a regional system which is now the only way to get improvements in youth services into the remote communities as a prevention strategy. So far the three Shires in our region have not formed a cohesive strategy to guide their programs. CAYLUS will work with them to assist them develop such a strategy, and is working collaboratively with them in many aspects of the provision of youth services in the region.

The above is a list of the factors that have impinged on remote Aboriginal communities in this region over the last twelve months. Aboriginal communities are uniquely powerless to prevent these sort of actions by government, and have been subject to a number of social experiments over the years for that reason. Arguably the NTER was a hasty publicity stunt undertaken by a struggling Federal Government to attract votes: a stunt that has cost the taxpayer approx \$1.5 billion with almost no returns, not even the votes they had hoped for. This system of imposing strategies has proved ineffective, and contrasts badly with the Opal Alliance strategy, which was developed from the ground up, and has saved the taxpayer an estimated \$10 million over the two years since the roll-out, as well as an estimated 13 lives.

We understand the new Labor Federal Government will continue with the NTER from 2009 to 2012. This action is warranted as long as some of the funding is used in prevention as well as more punitive strategies. CAYLUS has calculated there is a \$20 million funding shortfall in our region in the provision of comprehensive youth development services – mainly in infrastructure. This is about 1% of what has been spent on the NTER so far.

21. The current situation – enacting the second part of the Opal strategy

Central Australia is still in the honeymoon period in relation to Opal. There is no long-term sniffing in any NT communities. Small outbreaks are dealt with locally and with CAYLUS and other agency support. There are now a number of resources for communities to call on, from outstation rehabilitation to Mandatory Treatment Orders to systematic support for recreation programs and casework. CAYLUS is working to roll out the demand reduction strategy that is the second part of the Opal strategy. The NTER created one opportunity by notionally allocating \$3 million ABA funds to youth programs, but never getting around to committing the funds to any specific projects. CAYLUS, after extensive consultations with the CLC, successfully applied for these funds to provide some infrastructure to support youth programs in some key locations.

We calculate the shortfall in youth service funding at \$20 million (mostly infrastructure), and we are planning to advocate for funds from the Commonwealth and NT. Without this prevention strategy, the reduction in inhalant abuse will not be able to be capitalised on. The people who are unable to get inhalants are ready for alternative activities. If the state cannot provide these opportunities, how long will it be before this population turns to other drugs? Opal was never put forwards as the solution, but as a way of creating the possibility of a solution. If CAYLUS and other agencies cannot get the long-term investment in youth development programs that are run on a community development model, an opportunity to substantially improve the quality of life of Aboriginal people will be lost, as it was in the 90s in the Pitjantjatjara lands subsequent to the roll-out of Avgas.

Another issue is the lack of political will to enact legislation to give the capacity to enforce the replacement of standard unleaded by Opal. Three petrol stations in the Central Australia region are refusing to stock Opal and have stated they will not do so unless forced by law. CAYLUS is advocating for the Federal Government to make laws to give the Federal Health Minister the power to require that Opal be stocked in specified locations. Gilbert +Tobin submitted a paper to the Senate's visit to the NT in October 2008 that demonstrates the Commonwealth has the capacity to enact this sort of legislation under the Constitution. Without this legal basis, the regional roll-out remains as stable as the individual proprietors' willingness to accept Opal. It seems crazy to allow this incredibly successful health initiative to rest on the decision of a small group of individual retailers. The state does not allow individuals the choice to sell hand guns in these remote areas, citing the need to regulate dangerous goods, but will let them sell standard unleaded if they chose to. I understand the NT Government has committed support to our advocacy for this legislation, and this strategy will be part of our next proposal to the Commonwealth.

1. Conclusion

The above is an outline of the actuality of the work CAYLUS undertook as part of the Opal Alliance to achieve these successes'. It is not the whole story, especially as it does not outline the work done in SA and WA by NPY and other agencies, but it provides a wide perspective of the CAYLUS part of the Opal Alliance project. The story continues, and this snapshot taken in 2008 will age quickly as new developments unfold and new resources come on line.

The success of the Opal Alliance has a number of important lessons for policy.

It showed the benefits of addressing local issues in consultation with local people and agencies like CAYLUS and NPY, rather than the standard broad-brush approach designed to suit bureaucratic needs and political imperatives.

The project demonstrated there can be meaningful alliances between grassroots NGOs and Corporations like GPT.

It showed that the Federal Government can be influenced by a sensitive media strategy and prompted to roll out strategies shown to make economic and political sense.

It showed that a strategy can save money in the elimination of a number of costs to the community that were being incurred through the drug abuse.

It showed lives can be saved through the enactment of a supply reduction strategy.

It showed that an issue like petrol sniffing, which had seemed so entrenched in the region, can be overcome through a government supported community development process.



from the writer's notebook

Appendix 1 : Opal roll-out timeline – incremental steps to a total roll-out

Following is a timeline with key dates. It links the various advocacy events to policy shifts in the Federal government, demonstrating the sensitivity of government decision makers to relevant information from the region.

Feb 05 – Opal released – at that stage the Commonwealth was only going to provide the subsidy to communities that were using Avgas.

Feb 05 – Opal Alliance forms to advocate for a total roll-out plus supporting programs. Starts media campaign in support of Opal roll-out. In particular we provide media access to remote community residents to speak about the realities of petrol sniffing.

June/July 05 – Federal budget allocation of \$9.6 million over 4 years to extend area of roll-out : at that time 43 communities had Opal and 28 communities were on the waiting list.

July 05 – NT Coronial on petrol sniffing deaths takes evidence.

September 05 – Senate Committee formed to look at sniffing. Federal Government announce the 8 Point Plan - extra \$9.5 million over 2 years including \$6 million for Opal to go into more communities and roadhouses.

October 05 — NT Coroner hands down findings – supports Opal and youth programs

Feb 06 – one Opal site in Alice Springs announced by Federal Government.

14 March, 06 - Access Economics Report released publicly after pre- releasing it to the Commonwealth. Federal Minister announces Opal will be provided to any community that asks for it, but with only one site in Alice Springs.

June 06 – Senate Committee releases reports – endorses Opal and programs

July 06 – Alice included in Opal roll-out by Health Minister Tony Abbott – at that stage 59 communities, 14 roadhouses have Opal with commitment to 33 more sites. The commonwealth policy is now in support of regional replacement of unleaded with Opal.

September, 06 – Alice goes into Opal, but is withdrawn in the face of a consumer backlash. No Federal Government publicity campaign was rolled out in support of this initiative at the time, despite an allocation of \$800k being made for this purpose as part of the 8 Point Plan.

December, 06 – Opal Alliance runs press campaign to promote Opal in Alice Springs.

February, 07 - Alice goes back on to Opal, accompanied by Federal Government press campaign.

March 07 – *The Australian* article – Scourge of petrol sniffing defeated in central desert.



The Australian March 17 2007