

**OUR KIDS MATTER
PAINT SNIFFING: THE CHARTERS TOWERS STORY**

Elaine Gostzyla, Life Promotion Officer
and
Shiradean George, Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs Services Worker,
Charters Towers District Health Service

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Background

Inhalant misuse became a concern to residents of Charters Towers in the early months of 2002. Prior to this it had been confined to isolated incidences or users.

Its dramatic rise is attributed to a small number of young people who had come to town from elsewhere and brought the practice with them. These young people introduced the practice to a susceptible group of youth who in turn initiated an active drive for recruitment. Within a very short space of time a very minor problem became one which was escalating rapidly.

By April 2002 there were approximately 20 young people regularly practicing chroming. The majority of these were in the 14 – 19 age bracket. Of special concern was a pregnant girl, another who was breastfeeding, and some younger children (8 - 10 years of age) who formed a secondary group.

Parents were frightened that their children would harm themselves. These young people were becoming isolated and forming a sub culture. They were not attending school or joining in other activities with young people. They were hanging around parks and when intoxicated made it uncomfortable for other park users. When moved on from the parks they hid in drains, under bridges and in unused sheds.

Engagement

Welfare and other service organisations became aware of the rising problem and wanted to move quickly to contain it. Indigenous workers from the Charters Towers District Health Service and the Charters Towers Police Service organised meetings and discussions between families and service organisations.

There were two things that everyone wanted, everyone that is except the kids themselves

1. For the young people to cease sniffing paint
2. To prevent other young people from taking up the habit

The emphasis from these early meetings was

1. to work together, develop partnerships and collaborate
2. to concentrate on positives and ignore blame
3. to concentrate on action rather than strategies which would get bogged down in dialogue
4. to make this a whole of community issue (it was not only indigenous youth involved)

These four areas of foci became the foundation for the community action that followed and ensured that “*Our Kids Matter*” became a *ground up* project driven by the community.

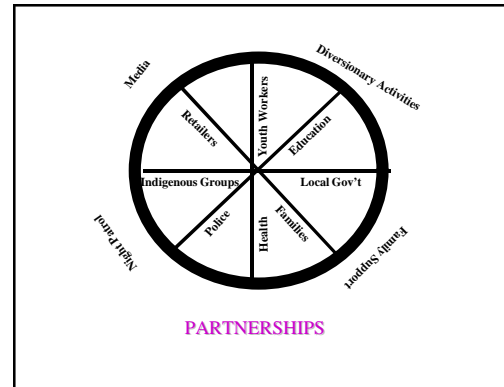
The first innovation was to sidestep the formation of a formal committee. There were several reasons for this.

- Firstly it was desirable to retain the input from the youth involved in chroming, and their families. Formal structures would not have supported this.
- Secondly this project was to have community ownership. This is central to the development of effective prevention strategies. Committees invariably retain a degree of responsibility for the issues they are set up to resolve. Responsibility in this instance was to sit squarely with the whole community.

- The third reason was with regard to time. This community needed to act quickly to contain the problem and then work on its elimination. Committees, with their inherent processes, can often be slow structures.

Without a formal committee mechanisms for maintaining communication and engagement became of major importance and resulted in the formation of strong partnerships.

Existing linkages within community and government organisations were utilised to engage key stakeholders. The indigenous workers within these agencies forged linkages between the working group and the indigenous community and indigenous service providers.



Well developed communication skills were paramount to engaging the various levels of community and incorporated recognition of the perspectives of those whose co-operation was being sought. Special care was taken not to lay blame or be negative, but to concentrate on positives and possibilities. When approaching the retailers for assistance, for example, we were mindful that what we were asking would affect their livelihood.

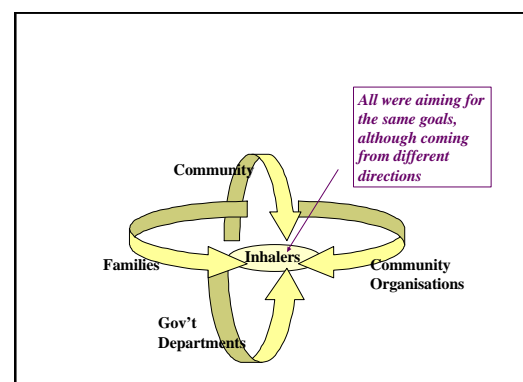
Responding to the community and affirming their efforts was the key to maintaining engagement. In practical terms this was achieved by information sessions, community meetings, family support, positive media coverage, certificates of appreciation, morning teas etc.

Model

The focus on action and collaboration resulted in a model where each agency undertook action based on its role and limitations ie initiated action within the limits of areas of responsibility and resources.

At different times, and depending on the circumstances, the various Government agencies took on a co-ordinating role for both the dissemination of information and active response.

Schematically all those involved in this model have their own roles eg police, health, schools, churches etc all coming from different directions but aiming for the same point or goal. For Charters Towers specifically this relates to: *families* who have reported walking the streets at night looking for sons/daughters; *police* who patrol and use the bail act or graffiti legislation to hold young people until parents can be informed; the *night patrol* who locates young people chomping, removes cans of paint from them and offers transportation home; *counsellors* who provide education and support to both the young people and their families; *Yak Shack, Gudjal* and *PCYC* who offer diversionary activities and the *Alliance of Charters Towers State Schools* who offers alternative education.



This model also supported the imaginative use of existing resources as below.

Legal There is no law prohibiting inhalant misuse. Rather than being a hindrance Charters Towers Police found alternative means of supporting families within the existing legal framework. The Graffiti Act was used for confiscation of paint and implements, detainment of young people, and to provide a means to penalise an adult for supplying paint to a minor (an adult was fined under this act for having an implement of graffiti and supplying it to youth). The Bail Act was used to place young people in the police lock up while their parents were contacted and then to place that young person on a curfew.

After Hours Monitoring Police, the C.D.E.P. Night Patrol, local indigenous community members and Security firms monitored inhalant misuse during evenings. Security firms contact police. Night patrol offer transportation home or to diversionary activities.

Reduction of Access All retailers in Charters Towers worked together to control access of paint by minors and to monitor paint theft. This included the installation of security cameras, alterations to placement of paint, staff training in monitoring 'in store youth', procedures for management involvement in paint sales. As a result of all of this retailers became ore aware of what was happening in their store.

Alternative Education The Alliance of Charters Towers State Schools, with the support of the "Youth at Risk Committee" is establishing an alternative education program targeting young people at risk of leaving the education system.

Planning

Early efforts to introduce diversionary activities and support systems to the young people and their families were ineffective. The young people were spending much of their time intoxicated and efforts to engage them were largely unsuccessful. Families were experiencing high levels of stress and were finding it difficult to think and act rationally or to make long term decisions.

It became apparent that the actual behaviours needed to be reduced in the short term to set the scene for the introduction of longer term solutions.

Stage one of the plan involved reducing access to aerosol paint. This relied heavily on the support of retailers, and was successful participation by all retailers in Charters Towers who sell aerosol paint participating. It has considerably reduced the accessibility of paint to minors. Stage one is now completed with reduced access to aerosol paint and the few remaining incidences of chroming being monitored

Stage two involves the introduction of longer term strategies and includes diversionary activities, provision of alternative education, and family support/education.

Young people were surveyed and identified boxing and music as desirable alternative activities. In response to this Gudjal, an Indigenous Community organisation has initiated diversionary programs which include music, discos, and arcade games. Boxing was commenced by a community volunteer and a Gudjal Youth Worker at the local gym and has now moved to the PCYC. Yak Shack is offering activities several nights per week and the night patrol is offering transportation to these activities and return home. The local council is also extending its youth areas with a sheltered skatepark, a bmx track, and exercise areas.

C.D.E.P. is now encouraging young people to participate in its employment programs if they are of school age and in their craft activities on a voluntary basis if they are younger.

The Alternative Education Program has had some setbacks due to staffing difficulties but has now secured a co-ordinator and is planning to commence in the near future.

Support Services for families and young people are also increasing with Community Mental Health recently employing a Child and Youth Mental Health Worker and an Indigenous Mental Health Worker, the Neighbourhood Centre securing funding for a Family Support Worker and Yak Shack offering courses in “How To Drug Proof Your Kids”.

Plans For The Future

Procedures are now in place to ensure continued monitoring and response for ongoing incidences of chroming. Structures are also in place to ensure that ongoing support will continue for the longer term strategies. The partnerships that have been developed have provided benefits to the parties involved and will form the basis for ongoing communication and collaboration.

Results

Charters Towers now has only one or two young people who are continuing to misuse inhalants sporadically. The majority of users have become involved in other activities. Some are participating in boxing and other recreational activities; some have joined programmes at C.D.E.P. and last year some

Other Benefits

This project relied heavily on cooperation and collaboration from across many different sectors of the Charters Towers community, “breaking new ground” in the types of alliances that were formed. One result of these alliances was empowerment of families, retailers and the broader community. This has been evidenced by some of the indigenous families who have now become involved in other community issues, and some the retailers who are becoming interested in other initiatives.

The greater willingness across the community to work together has increased communication between the various agencies (government and non government) and the broader community, and thus increased the capacity for this town to resolve issues.

Another result is the development of a community spirit and greater acceptance of diversity. Charters Towers has a sense of achievement and pride with respect to this project. This has had a positive affect on attitudes. Retailers for example have been overheard explaining to customers that these young people are members of the community and need to be protected and valued. And this last perhaps is the greatest achievement of all.