

## Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation (AERF)

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Over the past week a delegation comprising Major Brian Watters (Chair ANCD), Professor Ian Webster (Chair AERF), Mr Scott Wilson (ANCD and Chair of National Indigenous Substance Misuse Council) and Professor Margaret Hamilton (ANCD and the Director of Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre in Melbourne) have had an opportunity to visit a number of remote Indigenous communities in the Cape York region and meet with members of these communities, Aboriginal leaders and service providers to better appreciate the issues surrounding alcohol and other drugs in these communities.

Mr. Wilson, an Indigenous Australian who runs a service providing policy advice and programmes in South Australia, said following these visits : "The problems with grog are obvious. They pervade the communities we visited. We also saw these same communities wanting to and trying to do something about it. Grog stands as a symbol of rights and equality for many; while also contributing to health problems, violence and despair. This is a complicated mixture where simplistic solutions will not be the answer.

We need to listen to what these communities are saying and work with them to generate responses. We also need to resource them. Most of them don't have the capacity – the knowledge and skills – to sort this out on their own. They are not getting information about funding opportunities and alcohol programmes. I'm pleased there are groups such as Apunipima who are working as advocates and linking communities to resources, ideas and people who might help".

Professor Hamilton, said that it had been a rare privilege to have access to these communities and listen to them trying to work out solutions. "These communities are remote. They are isolated. They have been neglected for a long time. They suffer from a lack of servicing and basic resources. Transport is difficult with many communities virtually cut off for some months of the year. Where services are provided – such as primary schools and health clinics, staffing continuity is a problem.

Basic prevention as well as treatment is needed. Health is the major issue to focus on in these communities. Health in this sense means physical and mental health, well-being, coping and competence of a population. It goes beyond traditional health portfolios and includes economic, employment, housing, transport and education policies. It includes problem alcohol use; but is not confined to this. Grog strife is both a product of and a contributor to the low levels of community health we saw. Alcohol issues must be tackled."

"Early childhood is vital. Increasingly we have evidence suggesting that it is the first few years of life – before school that significantly influence outcomes in the areas of alcohol and drug trouble, youth suicide, crime and violence and other problems later in life. Action in these areas must be at the foundation of efforts to redress the grog story."

Major Brian Watters, Chairman of the ANCD, suggested that the ANCD would want to link this visit to other initiatives of the Council currently underway. "Issues affecting Indigenous peoples are high on the ANCD's agenda. Other work includes a project mapping drug and alcohol programmes across Australia for Indigenous peoples to help sort out where the gaps are and to describe successful programmes that might be useful to other communities.

The Council is keen to work with the National Drug Strategy Reference Committee for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and is keen to bring the situation in these communities to the attention of policy makers attention at national and state levels."

Professor Ian Webster, Chair of the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation said : "This new Foundation has a special brief to reach Indigenous communities and to assist these communities to deal with alcohol, petrol sniffing and related problems. The legislation which establishes the Foundation guarantees there will be funds available for Indigenous people and programmes that meet their needs.

The Foundation is keen to work in collaboration with the Indigenous organizations in Cape York Peninsula and looks forward to worthwhile partnerships".

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The Australian National Council on Drugs is the peak advisory body to Government on drug policy established by the Prime Minister in 1998.

For further information, please contact:

Major Brian Watters (ANCD Chairman) 0400 780 509  
Prof Ian Webster (AERF Chair & ANCD Member) 0414 462 168  
Prof Margaret Hamilton (ANCD Executive) 03 9256 6165 (pager)  
Mr Scott Wilson (ANCD Executive & AERF) 0410 419 915  
Mr Alistair Harris (ATSIC) 0409 658 177  
Mr Gino Vumbaca (ANCD Executive Officer) 0408 244 552