

Let's Get Serious About Tackling Indigenous Substance Misuse in the Northern Territory - Oct 2007

A/Prof Ted Wilkes, Chair, National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee, *October 2007*



Let me state at the outset that I welcome the focus and determination of many in government and the community to protect Indigenous children.

If we really are to make the positive health gains that so many Indigenous people crave then we need to start with our infants and our children. There can be no debate anymore that providing Indigenous children with opportunities and environments that are safe and secure is paramount.

Clearly, we Indigenous Australians are the most disadvantaged in our nation. We have a 20 year shorter life span, higher rates of chronic disease, alcohol, tobacco and other drug use, our education and employment opportunities equate to those of developing populations, and we are over-represented in the criminal justice system. We have a responsibility as individuals, parents, communities and as a nation to ensure the future of our children. They must be protected and nurtured to become our next leaders, educators, parents, role models and workforce.

Indigenous children are probably the most vulnerable group in Australian society today. However, there is a risk that alcohol issues and associated child abuse and violence in the Northern Territory are going to be perceived as being Indigenous problems only. This view is reinforced by the recent measures being couched in terms of law and order and squarely targeting Indigenous drinkers and communities. In reality the problem of substance misuse, violence and child abuse is a problem in all communities including non-Aboriginal communities.

The National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee (NIDAC) which I Chair is the leading voice in Indigenous alcohol and other drug policy and was specifically set up by the Australian National Council on Drugs to provide advice to the Government on these matters. NIDAC supports the Australian Government's commitment to address alcohol misuse in the Northern Territory but it appears that Indigenous expertise and strengths in Indigenous communities are being under utilized.

There are Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory that have already implemented effective alcohol management plans. Admittedly, some of these systems work better than others, however our best long term solutions require continued support and resources at the local community level for community people to work with police, health and liquor licensing authorities to develop local solutions. It is worth noting that the different systems introduced in Groote Eylandt and Maningrida communities have both been effective in reducing alcohol related problems, including violence because they are systems developed with, and thus respected by the communities. These communities are rightly concerned that the Australian Government could now come in and override locally developed initiatives that are working.

We also need to be sure that the new measures do not inflict a greater unintended harm. For instance, will contravention of the proposed alcohol bans result in even more Indigenous people being imprisoned? The Northern Territory Indigenous imprisonment rate is already the highest in Australia, with nearly 80% of its

prisoner population being Indigenous. Surely no-one can believe that more Indigenous people in prisons can be part of the solution.

Indigenous drinking is best understood as a group issue, not an individual issue, and some responsibility has to be placed on liquor licensing authorities to reduce the number of outlets, promote safe drinking, and stop sales discounting and other practices that encourage high consumption rates. An expert review of enforcement of licensing laws in Australia revealed authorities concentrated too much of their resources on maintaining public order and punishing drinkers in licensed premises, rather than focusing on license breaches and responsible sales.

It would make sense to have an independent review of the alcohol management plans currently in place and liquor licensing enforcement in the Northern Territory.

NIDAC is also aware that illicit drug use is increasing in a number of remote communities. As a result, it is imperative that those who have alcohol and drug problems have access to treatment. We desperately need more accessible and appropriate Indigenous treatment services to ensure we make the most of the opportunities that arise from this increased focus. Assisting people back into communities after treatment also has to be a priority if long term gains are to be made. Mainstream Australia has made great strides in recent times in reducing illicit drug problems and the evidence on why is becoming clearer. Put simply, greater resources directed towards reducing the supply of drugs works best when it occurs with greater resources also being directed towards increasing treatment services.

Our children are sometimes witnesses to the destruction that alcohol and drug use has on their mother or father, their sister or their cousin and how it impacts on the environment in which they live and their future growth. We must get serious about tackling substance misuse.

NIDAC is supportive of initiatives that seek to improve the education, health and well being of Indigenous children and families, which is detailed quite comprehensively in the recommendations of the "Little Children are Sacred" report. I can understand the Government wanting to do something about child abuse, it is unacceptable that children live in an environment where they are not safe, but it was disturbing to note that the "Little Children are Sacred" report found that "service providers were ill-equipped to identify, understand and know what to do about it".

The care and protection of Indigenous children is complex. The responsibility of child rearing in Aboriginal culture is shared and directly conflicts with the Australian legal system where rights and responsibilities of child rearing are often attributed solely to parents. This has enormous implications for the Australian Government initiative of withholding welfare payments of parents in a bid to encourage children to go to school.

I have spent most of life fighting for Indigenous health and Indigenous children deserve to be given the best start in life as it is the best chance for Indigenous people to live, grow and prosper as equals with other Australians.