# “Cheap Drunk”

## PETROL SNIFFING CAN BE BEATEN

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**Note**: The following is not intended to be an in-depth study of petrol sniffing or the anti–sniffing programs run across the region. Having been centrally involved in permanently stopping petrol sniffing at Ramingining in the early 1980’s I believe that I might have something to offer to the conversation. I do not have the time or the resources to do a full study.

Secondly deep down I am frustrated, along with many others, that Yolŋu youth and adults continue to suffer immensely over the continuation of this “problem”, despite the money spent to remedy it.  Like many things that work from the grass roots level, the stopping of petrol sniffing at Ramingining was never part of a petrol sniffing or substance abuse program. It became part of the work of a community development/education program that worked holistically along with the local Community Council, the homeland movement, dispute resolution processes and many other issues run out of a small three staff office at the time.

Thirdly because of this previous experience, in working with Yolŋu adults and young children involved in petrol sniffing for over 35 years, I have been deeply concerned to find, from the people’s point of view, why some of the antisocial behaviour, vandalism and substance abuse is happening.

And fourthly the voice of Yolŋu from the grass roots level is seldom heard in most mainstream dominant culture forums as it has trouble breaking through into the English-dominated media domain. I also think it’s relevant in an open democratic society for the voice of the voiceless to come through onto paper even if it is poorly done by me. So for what it is worth.

# Why sniff petrol

In 2016 I was called to a meeting of petrol sniffers by some Yolŋu[[1]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn1) parents. They were deeply concerned about their children sniffing and wanted to get help for them.

As I sat with this group of about five young men we quietly talked about a number of things, trying to discover what it was that would lead them to want to sniff petrol. One of my questions during a very long discussion in Yolŋu Matha was, “Why sniff petrol, it’s yätj (terrible/horrible)?”  One of the sniffers replied “Cheap drunk”!

## “Cheap drunk”

My association with petrol sniffing goes back to the 1960s in New South Wales. My best friend told me one day that he had sniffed petrol for a number of years. This friend was extremely good-looking and physically fit. He also won most of the sporting events he participated in and so I was shocked when he told me.

I remember talking to him at length, including what it was like and what were the side-effects? Yet I was also repulsed by the idea as I knew petrol stunk and gave me headaches if I smelt the fumes for any length of time. So I asked him why he had sniffed petrol. His first response was, “To get drunk and forget some of the things that were bothering me”.

His mother and father had abandoned him; gone on with their lives, and left him to live with his ageing grandmother. She was his guardian and his parents were not there like all the other kids at school. He felt dejected and extremely ashamed. At times he found life just too hard and difficult to deal with so he sniffed petrol to relieve the pain.

He started living at our place during daylight hours, walking the 2 km home to his grandma’s place at night time. He stopped sniffing because he **found support** from our family around the **real issues in his life**.

This experience in my school years gave me an advantage over most other mainstream people who were looking at the issue of Aboriginal children and young teens in Arnhem Land sniffing petrol. I saw it in a very different light. That is they were not sniffing just because they are Aboriginal. There would have to be a very good underlying reason as to why young people would sniff petrol as a cheap, get- drunk substance; and I am convinced it’s not boredom.

### It’s not boredom

For 40 years now I keep hearing people say the reason why Aboriginal children are sniffing is due to boredom. Boredom, like many of the “follow the leader” or “school yard” thrill seeking experiences, is a factor but is not the major underlying reason as to why young people sniff petrol or other inhalants. The reason why young people sniff petrol is more complicated than that.

## Social indicators

First of all, we need to be looking at the “problem” of petrol sniffing and the accompanying vandalism and law and order problems as social indicators. When we see them as social indicators we immediately see that the community is suffering different degrees of dysfunctionality. No “normal” community produces young people who are out of control doing such damage to themselves and others around them. Something is severely wrong.

Social indicators, like all warning signs, tell us to look past the “problem” to the root cause of why the “problem” is there in the first place. Dealing with the root cause will then deal with the “problem”.

So if boredom is not the problem then what is the problem?

## Mismatch between two cultures

In short I believe the root cause is in the social, economic and legal breakdown of Yolŋu society caused by a mismatch between them and the mainstream Australian dominant culture community.

For most dominant culture Australians this is an unintentional action but the reality is when any two different groups of people come together and coexist in the same living space then one culture becomes dominant. When this happens there language, law, social, legal and political systems become the norm in the mainstream community while the other cultures language, law, social, legal and political systems are suppressed, discouraged and even degraded. The suppression of Yolŋu culture is very evident.

This leads Yolŋu people too feel guilty, responsible, self-blaming, ashamed, powerless and inadequate because they wish they could have prevented the loss of their own cultural structure that now impacts on their loved ones and their society, even though it was beyond their control.

When this mismatch occurs over many generations it creates an intergenerational transfer of the trauma extending down to the present generation. This trauma experienced over generations is now evident in the lives of many young Yolŋu and other young Aboriginal people. The transmitted experience makes them want to escape being born on the wrong side of the cultural/language divide. They feel excluded from the dominant mainstream Australian community.

They suffer an identity crisis and have trouble living productive lives as elements of the mismatch is replayed in their own lives. The “cheap drunk” experience becomes the only outlet available to them.

Please see: Why Warriors Lie Down and Die: Chapter 11. Stop the World - I Want to Get Off.   Community violence; Pages 195 – 196. Intergenerational transfer of trauma; Pages 193-194.

The fact that most mainstream commentators on petrol sniffing, governments and non-government organisations alike, do not see this as the reason why sniffing and antisocial behaviour on Aboriginal communities exists, is the main root of the problem.

Without knowing the main underlying reasons that are the root causes of the trauma that young Aboriginal people experience can mean many of the interventions applied only make the trauma worse and therefore the need to sniff petrol and other antisocial behaviour increases.

## Diagnosing the problem

A good diagnosis of the problem is needed. Why is this important? It is important because unless you diagnose a problem correctly then you will not be able to implement the correct strategy to resolve it. In fact with no diagnosis or an incorrect one you can only make the problem far worse. In this case we add to the trauma that young people are already experiencing.

And this is where it becomes a bit difficult for many mainstream, dominant culture people involved in the conversation to ever get to the bottom of the “problem” and truly understand it.

The major difficulty is the poor communication that exists in this cross-cultural/cross language environment. It’s a reason why very few people investigating the subject get any real answers and why they rely so heavily on Yolŋu people from within the cultural group to come up with all the answers.

This makes it very difficult for the Yolŋu people involved because they are also enmeshed in the very same socio-economical and legally confused environment that the young people are struggling in. Many adult Yolŋu don’t have a good picture of how the world around them works in an economic, medical and legal sense; they are also struggling to deal with a foreign English culture and language.

On top of this many of these adults may also be suffering different degrees of trauma passed on to them by their parents and grandparents. For them, the unknown origins of petrol sniffing just adds another dramatic event to their already out-of-control lives. Some just want the sniffing to stop as the extra shame it brings on their people is just too much to bear.

### Case #1

A Balanda[[2]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn2) man told me about the following experience he had while working with Yolŋu people at Elcho Island.

One day he was visiting some of the people. This day as he approached the family he saw many of the adults sitting outside under the shade of a tree playing cards, while 20m away three young people were sniffing petrol.

He walked up to the group and said, “Can’t you see the young people sniffing just over there”? The group ignored him and so he said it again. After a number of times of trying to engage with the adults, one of them looked up and said, “They’re not sniffing. Go away”.

This left the Balanda man totally and absolutely confused and very disappointed in the Yolŋu involved, and in fact, he went on to blame the Yolŋu adults for the problem.

So what went wrong? He appeared to be doing the right thing by trying to get the parents and the community involved in working on the “problem”. Good community development principles tell him that the answer has to come from the people and he is right.

But there were a number of things very wrong with his approach that would have gotten the Yolŋu involved right off side. He was actually quite culturally incompetent when it came to working in a cross-cultural / cross-language setting. Some of the problems include:

1. Sadly he learnt no Yolŋu Matha (language) to show that he was ready to come halfway in communicating effectively with the adults and the children in a Yolŋu community. He was not ready to overcome the “them and us” factor that now often exists in communities.
2. He never thought for a moment that he had entered their living space (like walking into somebody’s lounge room) and began initiating a conversation with people inside in a very rude way. He should have first asked permission to approach the group as you would ask permission to enter anybody’s home/living space.
3. He walked up to the group who was sitting on a blanket under the shade of a tree and stood over them. Standing over them and talking down to them was a very paternalistic action. This immediately created a confrontational them and us situation. For Yolŋu people this can be experienced as “The big Balanda always talking down to us as if we are children”.
4. He totally missed the fact that some Yolŋu people were severely psychologically depressed and were unable to cope with even seeing petrol sniffing right under their noses. It was just too much for them, and easier to put your head down and play the next round of cards.
5. He was unaware that petrol was not seen as a poison by most people in this particular Yolŋu community at that stage.

## Culture of silence

Some mainstream, dominant culture people may still find it hard to understand the Yolŋu adult’s response in the above story. Many will see it as abnormal and totally irresponsible. In short, this response is due to a culture of silence.

The culture of silence is where a whole community or groups within that community experiences communal depression. As with all forms of depression, different people within a group will be experiencing different levels of the communal depression. But because it happens within a particular cultural group of people it changes the people’s culture. Their makeup changes from a happy, outgoing, assertive, confident people to an inward-looking culture displaying a sad, quiet, unconfident, morbid demeanour.

In its extreme forms, a culture of silence stops people participating in life itself and whole groups of people will “sit down and die”. Of course, during the dying process, they will participate in many forms of addiction and social destruction.

Across the nation many different Aboriginal groups of people have done just that, stop participating and sat down and die. I first saw elements of this culture in Arnhem Land in the 1970s [[3]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn3) and this was with some of the most untouched that Aboriginal people in Australia. I have read other references, which I cannot locate at the time of writing, which spoke of Aboriginal people aborting their children so their children would not have to live in a world that was seemingly so out of control[[4]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn4).

Today in pockets all over Australia there are a number of different groups of Aboriginal people who are displaying severe cases of a culture of silence. I have visited Aboriginal communities outside of Arnhem Land where all the men in the community stare at their feet and do not participate actively in the running of the community. Once confident, assertive and outgoing people are now broken and lost.

Over the four decades I have been in Arnhem Land I have seen Yolŋu change from very assertive, confident, outgoing people to inward looking, with many depressed people showing little interest in life other than just playing the next set of cards.

Frontline workers in some Aboriginal communities across the nation experience “mums the word” interaction with some Aboriginal groups. Even where internal family violence has occurred, to adults or even children within, the group will close up not talking to anybody from the dominant culture, especially dominant culture authority figures. They believe, if they do, that the resulting violence, shame and oppression perpetrated against them, as a group of people, will far outweigh any of the internal violence that has occurred within their own group. This is Australia today, 2016 for many Aboriginal people.

People who have **never** been depressed might find it hard to understand the full ramifications of severe depression. Similarly, dominant culture people who have never experienced life as a Yolŋu or other Aboriginal person also will have little understanding what it is like to live in a cultural group that is constantly belittled, denigrated and excluded from the mainstream. Where ones economic, legal, governance and cultural ways and rights are misunderstood and constantly dismissed out of hand. Where their poetic and intellectual languages are seen as primitive and discarded by trainers and educators.

Where you experiences a constant assault from a foreign language (English), and mainstream medical, legal, political and economic processes and systems. Where confusion about the new world you now live in reigns supreme. Top this off with a constant barrage of insult on your people’s culture, person and identity[[5]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn5). These are the pressures that create a “culture of silence”.

A few stoic characters will stand out of the crowd. However many will just want to deny the social chaos happening around them, to their people or their families, others just want to sit down and die. Like depression, a culture of silence is a condition that the people themselves just cannot switch off. It needs the outside influences, which are creating the psychological damage to be removed or modified.

Aboriginal people whose culture is the most different from the mainstream stream Australian culture will be the ones who are the most affected when they are compelled, for one reason or another, to be in close contact with the very foreign mainstream dominant Australian culture.

So when outsiders come to seek answers from the people themselves to things like petrol sniffing it is hard because so many of the Yolŋu adults just don’t want to know about it. Plus it’s also hard because those who are still functioning within the group have their hands full of all the things they are juggling just to try and keep their family, clan and community functional.

Where the group feel they have a degree of confidence and control, that they understand the subject enough and clearly see petrol as a poison, they will stand up against it and even move to create their own interventions to control it, as it happened at Ramingining in the early 1980s.

## Needing to have an objective view

Plus it’s hard, many times, for the people to have objective responses to problems affecting their own people. We need to remember that most Yolŋu are not living in a “normal” community where they are not experiencing some level of dysfunction and social oppression or where many people are not confused about how the world around them operates. So for them to take an objective view of the problem and be able to then effectively find solutions is difficult.

For example in my early work with petrol sniffing in Arnhem Land the Elders working with me were surprised to find that Balanda teenagers in Sydney were also sniffing petrol. I had shown them newspaper cuttings. All of a sudden they realised that the petrol sniffing problem in their own community was a human problem not some weakness in their own people’s genetic makeup.

This changed their whole approach to stopping petrol sniffing at the time. They were no longer just ashamed of the problem but wanted to find out the real reasons why their young people were sniffing like those Balanda kids in Sydney. They also wanted to know how petrol affected the body. This objective view is absolutely essential to finding real solutions to the “problem”. Finding that objective view sometimes needs an outside pair of eyes in the conversation with the people.

## The making of adults

There is also another major issue in this mix. Unfortunately many of Yolŋu educational institutions have just been seen as “ceremonies” by both past and contemporary mainstream authorities. They have never been seen for their real human empowerment value.

Therefore many of the traditional ceremonial processes that support a good transition from being a child to adulthood for both male and female Yolŋu youth have now fallen out of use or have been substantially downgraded, leaving these young people with a severe identity crisis.

These influences have included Yolŋu youth needing to attend Western educational institutions at the expense of their own very effective traditional education processes and institutions.

## History around petrol sniffing

Petrol sniffing in Arnhem Land started amongst Balanda air force personnel who were based at Milingimbi during World War II. Then because Yolŋu saw Balanda sniffing petrol it was considered harmless, even if it was a disgusting thing to do.

Sniffing was taken up by some of the Yolŋu youth in the 1950s, 60s and 70s and it seems to come and go almost on a seasonal basis.

Leading up to this time many different Yolŋu clan and family groups had come to live to on what we now know as Yolŋu communities (Missions) to survive. It was a period of great turmoil and these Missions were more like large refugee camps of displaced and traumatised people from all along the coast now living on another clan's land.

The Yolŋu regional economic structure was in total collapse after years of pastoral wars and the cessation of the centuries-old international Macassan trade. On top of this, the many skirmishes with the British-owned Malay crewed boats all along the coast had left some clans extinct or down to very few in number.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s as I worked with Elders and petrol sniffers at Ramingining many of the stories were related to me. At that time there were 42 petrol sniffers in the community.

I worked with the 2 groups, the elders and the sniffers, to the point that there has been and still is very little petrol sniffing occurring at Ramingining to this day. This is surely significant as it is the only major community in Arnhem Land without the “problem”. (Please see the story of Ramingining and petrol sniffing in the Why Warriors Lie Down and Die: Pages 239 -244.)

There was a period in the early 2000s that petrol sniffing again became a problem across the north-east Arnhem Land region. At the time I was CEO of Aboriginal Resource and Development Services (ARDS). We had built the infrastructure for Yolŋu Radio and so we ran a series of, unfunded, radio programs on Yolŋu Radio that again brought sniffing under control. There were only 2 hard-core sniffers left across the region at the end of this program.

Then with the federal government intervention into the Northern Territory in 2007 petrol sniffing again raised its head and has now become a permanent problem on some communities. It has even reached new heights where sniffers have turned to avgas creating extra problems for communities where aircraft transport is an absolute necessity. This has led to a number of strategies including having planes flown out of the community overnight so they are not tampered with.

At the same time in some places, a heightened level of vandalism has accompanied the sniffing. In fact, I believe there is an intentional reaction to the Balanda dominant culture that is occurring amongst Yolŋu and other Aboriginal Youth right across the Northern Territory. From my understanding, this kickback is clearly connected to the same foundational problems causing petrol sniffing.

## Different interventions

There has been a number of different intervention activities employed to try and solve the problem of petrol sniffing. These responses include harassment, banishment, social work, recreational activities, fuel additives and fuel substitutes, and community development/community education models.

### Harassment

Although harassment is not a prescribed intervention anymore it is still frequently done on an individual level. In many cases this is just a normal human response to a problem, some people, just want to go away.  In the past harassment was the first go-to strategy used in most cases where members of the community would just chase and intimidate the sniffers whenever they could. The strategy never seemed to work as they never got to the bottom of why these young people were sniffing. Where and if the harassment strategy is still applied today it further polarises young people into their own sub-cultural group creating a “them and us” culture within the Yolŋu community itself.

Today official night patrol programs and policing programs are instructed that the harassment strategy can be dangerous for sniffers who are using some substances. These include the Low Aromatic Fuels (LAF) such as Opal petrol.

So engagement is the preferred way, trying to relate to them and understand them. However real deep understanding and therefore effective interventions seem hard to achieve. We need a different strategy.

### Banishment

Banishment has a long history and was used as a way to address petrol sniffing on a number of communities. At Yirrkala young people sniffing were sent to Bremer Island. Some people were also banished from Milingimbi to one of the closer islands. Some still use the strategy today, where the petrol sniffers are usually sent to a homeland. Banishment did not work then and is very limited now as the petrol sniffers usually find themselves back in the same socio-economic landscape they came from and therefore the same confusion and feelings of abandonment exists. Allowing most to quickly fall back into the same practices.

However there are some real advantages to this methodology where banishment to a homeland gives respite to the family and or breaks up the petrol sniffing group.

And where there is an uncle or relative, on a homeland, who can take the young person under their wing then there is some chance of some good identity reinforcement occurring, which the sniffer badly needs, then this has to be worthwhile.

### Social work

The social work approach carried out by Rev B. Clarke in the late 1960s on Elcho Island, showed real signs of empowering the people. This approach entailed working with fractured families and clans around family problems from the sniffers point of view. Clarke used translators to facilitate communication. Much of the petrol sniffing stopped at this time but started again a few years after the program ceased.

This social work method required those doing the intervention from outside to have real faith in the people’s ability to find solutions within their own social, economic and legal cultural structures with some careful prompting and coaching.

The only drawback of this intervention model in the 1960s was that it never taught the people about the effects of petrol on the human body and the other information that sniffers or their family were confused about. So there was no understanding within the general Yolŋu community that petrol was a poison.

I am told today that there is a lot more education material used however I have not had the opportunity to check out these materials to see how relevant or effective they are.

### Recreational activities

Providing recreational activities has been one of the major interventions used by many to try and deal with petrol sniffing over a number of decades.

Recreation programs, however they are organised, through local Yolŋu contemporary committees or groups, usually fall outside the control of the family, clan or tribal unit.

Note: My comments here are on the basis of the fact that traditional Aboriginal groups like Yolŋu society have their own social, economic and legal, political structures that are thousands of years old. Contemporary local committees and groups are usually not part of these ancient old traditional structures. Just because some individual representatives are from these traditional bodies they are usually on the committee as individuals rather than as true legal representatives of their family, clan or tribe.

Many of these committees are run on dominant culture lines and communication is in English, which is a fifth or sixth language to most Yolŋu people.  There is a clear disconnect here and this disconnect is a major part of the underlying problem we are dealing with when looking for real solutions to these vexing issues.

Although recreation programs may have some positive effects to giving young people alternatives to keep them occupied or involved in positive activities I do not believe that they should be seen as the main overall long-term solution.

Recreation programs seemed to have their genesis in the constant conversation that speaks about boredom in Aboriginal communities.  This creates a real problem as it feeds into the already very strong perception that it’s the government’s responsibility to provide superduper recreational programs in all communities across Australia.

Part of the problem is that many Yolŋu youths and even their parents believe that the government is failing this area. If the people and a youth are continually fed the idea, “that it’s the government’s fault” that “the government have not given enough money to provide all the recreational programs”. Or it’s the “fault of the local regional Council” that has not sourced the money to provide enough recreational activities (comments made by Yolŋu youth across the region) then we are creating a real problem. Unfortunately, his is the understanding on many Yolŋu communities today and builds on a very confused view of contemporary economics.

I grew up in a rural setting in New South Wales and never had the mindset that it was the government’s responsibility to provide recreational programs for the young people of our town. Because we never heard this conversation we never thought the thoughts and so set to work at providing our own recreational activities.

Many Aboriginal communities who are suffering from petrol sniffing exist in a very beautiful and adventurous landscape with all sorts of wonderful recreational opportunities, yet there is a constant conversation about boredom, driven mainly Balanda until it become a song that both Yolŋu and Balanda sing. With the correct information in regards to economic literacy these unreal perceptions can be balanced so the people do not believe they are missing out on the flow of government money just because they are Yolŋu.

Secondly most of these programs require recreational officers coming to work on the communities and running recreational programs. There is a danger that recreational officers are put on a pedestal by the young people, because it seems they have all the “goodies”, yet the young people’s own parents in comparison are seen as having no ability to access the same “goodies”. This further alienates young people from their parents, driving a bigger wedge between their own parents and other elders and their own cultural background, which leads to greater identity crisis by these young people.

Any program that moves Yolŋu youth further from their family and clan support units to dominant culture dependent programs, whoever they’re run by, can have severe detrimental effects on the people and the long-term. It also multiplies the confusion that many Yolŋu people have about contemporary economics.

In past cases young people who were non-sniffers before the programs started became sniffers so they would not miss out on the program’s benefits. One famous case occurred in central Australia where a recreation officer decided to take petrol sniffers rabbit hunting to deal with their “boredom”. To his great surprise the number of petrol sniffers doubled in a few nights as other young people decided they also wanted to be in on the rabbiting trips.

Best practice today seems to encourage programs that do not directly reward the sniffers which is working in the right direction. However to really solve the “problem” we need to look at programs that demystify the people to deal with some of the social-economic underlying causes.

### Fuel additives and substitutes

In the early 1980s fuel additives were added to the petrol at Ramingining as a way to stop the petrol sniffing. I remember it being called “skunk juice” as it made this petrol smell even worse than what it already was. Most the sniffers kept sniffing even though it made them extremely sick. It never was an answer.

In the early 1990s Avgas was used on many communities as an alternative to petrol.

Opal fuel was also rolled out in many communities in 2004.

Unfortunately many Yolŋu petrol sniffers have continued to sniff Avgas creating a problem for themselves and aircraft operators.

Fuel substitutes should only be seen as a stopgap solution. Opal fuel has been useful in stopping the tsunami of sniffing in some regions. However without dealing with the underlying problems some stop sniffing but then when the opportunity arises many turn to other drugs like marijuana and alcohol as the same socio-economic and legal confusion and dysfunctionality exists.

### Community development & education

Community development and community education was implemented at Ramingining in the early 1980s and it worked.[[6]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn6)

One of the reasons why Ramingining still has no petrol sniffing today is because community education and empowerment was the main part of the process. I carried out face-to-face economic and legal literacy workshops with many families. The community dialogue that came out of this allowed the elders to bring back ceremonial practices to cement the learning at a higher traditional academic level. This same six months long traditional university “ceremony” program completed the young men and women’s transition to responsible adulthood.

I remember the day the tipping point happened very clearly. After many months of education with the Elders and the petrol sniffers, I asked the Elders what they would do if they had petrol sniffing and there were no Balanda around. They said that they would bring back Gunapipi[[7]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn7) a ceremony that had been banned earlier by Mission authorities. This was 1981 and the same ceremony still occurs annually at Ramingining today.

Transition from child to adulthood is extremely important for any group of people. Mainstream society seems to do it around different stages of contemporary education, although it is question if it works that well for all.

This same mainstream contemporary education transition process seems to fail miserably for Yolŋu. In fact many young Yolŋu people returning from southern training institutions to a lifetime of drug abuse. Something that has worked well for 40,000 years must be at least worth investigating. Very little has been written on it and I probably don’t have the time for it here, except to say that the stages of learning for young Yolŋu men and women were much like the Jewish stages of transition. For young Yolŋu men it started at their circumcision ceremony and then went on to higher levels of learning as in the ceremony above.

These ancient “ceremonies” need to come out of the derogatory, stereotype, naming box that mainstream has put them in and be seen as real functioning social, economic and legal “Original Australian” training institutions that they are.

However many of these ceremonies are now under attack by many different naive, paternalistic, ethnocentric dominant culture groups within the mainstream and from some Yolŋu groups themselves. This is not so at Ramingining.

Again in the 2000s the Yolŋu radio, stop petrol sniffing, programs also worked by giving parents and community leaders the information and knowledge around economic, social, medical and legal issues necessary for them to stop the sniffing across the whole region of north-east Arnhem Land. During this time many Yolŋu people started to feel good about themselves and their own culture because at last they had answers to many issues they were confused about. Then came the federal government intervention and crisis descended on Arnhem Land and other communities across the NT.

## Diagnosing the problem

To solve any problem you need to diagnose what is the real reason behind the problem. In this case we need to establish why young people will risk being very sick just for a cheap drunk experience.

### Sniffing’s threefold effect

As my childhood friend taught me in the 1960s he sniffed for three reasons. Firstly, to temporarily forget his sense of abandonment and shame and not because he loved the very short high that he got from sniffing.

Secondly the pain he suffered also seemed to wipe out the greater pain he felt from desertion. This is why so many in similar predicaments self-harm as the pain experience from the physical pain is less than the greater social fracture pain experienced.

And thirdly it also spoke volumes to his own family. When his father found out he’d been sniffing he would come to visit/catch up with him.

The same is for the Yolŋu kids of Arnhem Land. Yes they want the cheap drunk experience for a number of reasons but they also are sending a message to their parents and carers. Some say they want to shame their parents, be noticed by them, or force them into giving them money.

### Drilling down into the problem

Over the last few months I have done research on two major communities as to why young people are sniffing. Some say their sniffing because their parents won’t give them any money. The people I was speaking with were young adults and old enough to earn themselves a wage, but they considered it was their parent’s job to keep them. There was a belief in this group that Balanda had open access to money and goods that their Yolŋu parents somehow didn’t. So some of them felt a deep sense of shame that their parents didn’t have equal access to money like the Balanda parents seemed to.

The other much younger group that I spent some time investigating seem to have very different reasons for their behaviour. Some of the young people in that community and adults told me that these young people were sniffing petrol and vandalising property and planes because, “I/they hate Balanda”. When I asked, “Why do you/they hate Balanda”, the first response I got a number of times was, “Because Balanda hate us” or “They believe Balanda hate them”.

I’d never heard this response before in any Yolŋu community and I was shocked.

### Balanda hate them

When I started digging down into why they thought that Balanda hated them the responses became very complicated with many different social economical angles to it. However there was a general theme.

Firstly these young people believed the Balanda were not sharing any economic rewards with them. This was despite the fact that government was spending millions of dollars building new houses in the post-cyclone reconstruction on their community. They were of the belief that government can just make or print money and that whatever the moneymaking process was Yolŋu people were being locked out of it. In their mind all Balanda across Australia got their houses for nothing from the government so new houses being built on community was not factored into their thinking.

This mindset has existed over the last 30 years that has become exaggerated since the 2007 federal government intervention.

Some young people blamed the local Regional Council for not getting access to larger amounts of money to create recreational programs for them.

Others spoke of how the schooling system was “like a jail” where they are locked up behind high security fences, where teachers have little ability to communicate with them and where they learn nothing. Some went on to say the teachers can’t control classrooms so they just blame them/the children all the time for everything that goes wrong.

They also knew if they didn’t go to school their parents would be further economically penalised.

## Some answers

### Community workers

I believe there is a great need for community workers to be employed across the region as were deployed in the 1970s and 80s. These people need cultural competency, community development and communication training.

Only when the real issues are dealt with will petrol sniffing and property destruction stop.  Good community workers can dig down to find out why young people are behaving this way and why they act as disenfranchised people within their own communities. If trauma and social-economic dysfunction and confusion are the reasons then the only way to solve the problem is to have trained community workers working alongside Yolŋu people, including working with whole family groups.

Part of their role would also be to identify the people’s questions and contradictions around medical, economic, legal and general current affairs information. This could feed into the production of good community/adult education radio and Internet programs, in their own language, eliminating the confusion/powerlessness that Yolŋu people are experiencing.

Community workers can help Yolŋu find ways of being including in the development and maintenance of their own communities rather than just things being done for them. Why Warriors Pty Ltd would be willing to employ and train these workers across the region.

### Basic economic literacy

For over 30 years now I have campaigned for an economic literacy program for Yolŋu people in their own language. The need is now greater than ever.

Some financial literacy programs were delivered, however understanding budgets and the like are not where Yolŋu are at. They need constant conversations in their own economic language that deals with their specific confusion around contemporary economics. If people believe that government can “just print money and hand it out”, then somebody says to them, “If you have a budget you always have money”, many people will think, “What I need is two or three budgets”.

Unless the conversation around economics deals with the specific contradictions that Yolŋu people have in relation to the contemporary economic system their confusion will not disappear. Sadly the money spent on “financial literacy” could have moved Yolŋu out of their sense of confusion regarding the contemporary economic world[[8]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn8).

I question how any group of people can get excited about education or training, or develop businesses if the core basic understanding of how contemporary economics across the world operates is non-existent or very confusing for them.

Many Yolŋu today are happy to stay on welfare because they now believe welfare to be the “new economic way of the world”. They also believe, due to their mystified understanding, that welfare payments should be double or triple what they are today.

If Yolŋu parents are confused about economics and tell their children that it is Balanda who are stopping them getting access to money and goods then this sets up a no-win situation for all.

This call for good economic literacy continues to fall on deaf ears. If Yolŋu people believe that Balanda get all their housing, goods and jobs given to them by a “grant” of some form from the government then they will continue to believe that until they have other evidence that convinces them of the real situation.

Deep economic and legal literacy programs can also help Yolŋu people to transition from traumatised people on welfare to functioning citizens that can seize the opportunities that exist on their resource rich estates. There are millions of dollars of unrealised business opportunities that currently exist across Arnhem Land.

Again, Why Warriors could produce radio and Internet programs to deal with the whole economic education area. We have the skills, knowledge and the economic and legal language in Yolŋu Matha to do this education. Over the last 30 years we have participated in many face-to-face workshops and radio programs development around the subjects of medical, economic and legal literacy.

### Real schooling

The education system needs teachers who learn the language of the local people so they can work more readily with traumatised young people, create safe and effective learning environments, control classrooms, answer some of questions that students have, and do genuinely effective education.

All the latest schemes that have been tried in Aboriginal education have come to nothing. How about trying education using an Australian language, Yolŋu Matha, as the main conduit for learning? I’m not talking about full bilingual education here. Let’s just get some good basic communication happening to create a safe and more effective learning environment.

Many will say that this would cost too much. However with the cost of recruiting one teacher being anything between $60 and $160,000 or more and the cost of the massive social problems now occurring plus the policing and incarceration costs I think this argument is truly dead in the water. That’s not to mention the massive cost to Yolŋu people themselves, where Yolŋu receive very little from the “education process”.

The coming and going of teachers at the moment is like backpacker tourists. While backpackers may be great at fruit picking for short periods of time the same model is not good for building relationships with Yolŋu children and teens in a classroom over a number of years and being able to communicate with the students at an intellectual level. Yolŋu students are being traumatised and left out in the social wilderness by this failed education process.

The Education Department’s continual denial of equipping their teachers in language and cultural competency skills must change. Some ask, “Will all teachers learn language if they were given the resources and time to learn”? The short answer is no - but some will. The teachers who do will stay and develop long-term relationships with the community. Then as each new group of recruits join the same process another few will learn, then after a number of years we will have many long-term teachers on community that can communicate sensitively and intellectually without further traumatising Yolŋu students. The saving to government and positive outcomes for Yolŋu student will be massive.

Culturally safe, linguistically constructive and intellectual learning environments will only exist when teachers come halfway and do their share of learning in a very complex cross-cultural cross language learning environment.

Why Warriors can provide this training to teachers in a mentoring package, through workshops and seminars or in self-learning modules. We have over 30 years’ experience in teaching, language learning, cultural competency, community development/education and cross-cultural communication skills.

## In conclusion

Petrol sniffing and property destruction is a social indicators that something is extremely wrong. To stop such activity we need to look beyond the problem to what is causing young Yolŋu people participate in such behaviour.

Yolŋu are suffering from the effects of a form of community violence which has produced many generations of trauma. This leads to an intergenerational transfer of that trauma to the youth of today. This is complicated by the fact that Yolŋu are now also experiencing deep confusion around contemporary socio-economic, legal, medical and political systems or how the contemporary world operates around them.

Their ancient old educational institutions and processes (ceremonies) have been called into question and disempowered. In many places these age old institutions have been replaced by contemporary Western education institutions and processes that do not work very well for them. This has created dysfunctional culture called a “culture of silence”.

Intervention in this area requires the use of well-trained community workers. These specialists will need to work with many different members of the Yolŋu community. Sometimes they will work on interventions within family and clan units. At other times they will need to organise workshops so the people can discover the answers to the many questions they have.

At the same time other interventions pointed out above can be implemented like the teaching of economic literacy in Yolŋu Matha and training teachers so they can teach effectively and efficiently in an Original Australian (Yolŋu) context.

The question needs to be asked of any intervention;

Does the intervention empower the people for them to be able to take better control of their families and community life into the future? Or is it just another service activity that feeds an already very large mostly ineffective ‘Aboriginal Industry’.

Richard Trudgen © October 2016

[[1]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref1) Yolŋu: Yolŋu means human or humans, person or people.  It also now means an Aboriginal person or people from northeast Arnhem Land in the NT.

[[2]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref2) Balanda:  Balanda comes from the word “Hollander”, from the Yolŋu contacts with people from former Dutch colonies in Asia; and is used to refer to European or English-speaking “Western” person or people.

[[3]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref3) You Can’t Say No To Balanda to: “Why Warriors Lie Down and Die”: Pages 188 -191.

[[4]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref4) If somebody finds references to these please pass on.

[[5]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref5) As in the Adam Goodes case.

[[6]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref6) The petrol sniffing story, Ramingining: “Why Warriors Lie Down and Die”: Pages 239 -244.

[[7]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref7) Gunapipi has received very bad press from dominant culture writers. If you research it on online believe very little of what you read. Take a lesson in testing it by the fruits it as produced. No petrol sniffing in a community for over 30 years.

[[8]](http://www.whywarriors.com.au/wp-admin/post-new.php%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref8) Having spent over 30 years now mapping the contradictions in relation to contemporary economics that Yolŋu have, I have a very clear understanding of the subject needs for this education.