

Speech for YANQ Conference Brisbane 21ST April 2005

Title: Chroming, what works and what may work and what is happening in Townsville

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Acknowledgements

Firstly I pay my respects to the Traditional Owners of this country here in Brisbane Turrbal people to the Brisbane Council of elders.

A Traditional greeting from Biri-gubba people from North Queensland "Wana Mulli" and the brothers and sisters from the Torres Strait " You Pella" Naka menali esso.

Traditional greetings to visitors and delegates from the Pacific Islands " Wantok" "Bulla Bulla Venaka" "Malo Malolei" "Talofa Lava" "Aloha" "Kia Orana" "Bonjour" Merci Bo ku.

"Epeha ana koe Epeha ana Korua Epeha ana Koutou Koutou Katoa Tino pai Morena". (Good morning everyone).

Thank you to the Waka Waka Dancers, brother Country Matheson and dancers from yesterday.

To the organizers of YANQ Conference, I thank you for this opportunity to come down to Brisbane and for your generous hospitality.

I would also like to thank my sponsors Townsville City Safe Committee, especially Adrienne Insard the coordinator of this program.

To my work colleagues from Lifeline who have been wonderful with their support and who are here today I thank you.

In 2005 with the (VSU) Voluntary Student Union Legislation / (ASOL) Anti Student Organization Legislation JCUPSA, we have stood strong because united we wont be defeated.

It is an honor to be able to speak and present with Regional Coordinating Magistrate from Townsville Mr.; David Glasgow, and whose support to the Townsville /Thuringowa Indigenous Community Justice Group (TTICJG) and his support to the Murri and Torres Strait Islander elders on Juvenile matters before the courts, has been outstanding, built on mutual respect and cultural understanding.

I would like to thank the TTICJG chairperson Mr. Graham Patel and coordinator Mr. Kevin Ngan-woo and the committee members for their support and passion in helping our young people in Townsville and Thuringowa.

The question that we have to confront this morning is, chronic or volatile substance misuse, why is there a social breakdown and how is it impacting on young people in our communities, whether they be urban, rural and remote. If we are to look at what has happened in the past and my experience goes back to when I was first a youth-worker back in the early nineties after leaving the public service, I think back to the past and to where I am today I feel I am very lucky and I am honored by the support that I got at being mentored way back then by some wonderful and caring Murri and Torres Strait Islander elders and community members from Townsville after coming straight from the halls of learning from Gatton Agriculture College to Lincoln College or University as it is today.

Also with the prevailing analysis of substance abuse and addiction it is a symptom of an underlying social and personnel problem but when I look around in North Queensland, it's happening in the bush, towns and cities you can understand why with racism, dispossession, unemployment, poverty and young people are looking for those role models.

Last week in Townsville as part of Youth week Indigenous film maker Jason Ives interviewed and filmed 17 young Murri and Torres Strait Islander people from Townsville talking about their life, family and their goals was extremely positive thing especially with a number of Indigenous young people from a number of schools from the Townsville area.

Overview Young People in Queensland

What is health status of young people in Queensland?

In Australia in 1996, mental health disorders accounted for 55% of the burden of disease and injury to young people. Substance abuse disorders account for the majority of this burden. In Queensland over the last ten years, hospitalizations for intentional self-harm have increased for both males and females.

In 1997-2001 in Queensland, rates for Hep C notifications in young people aged 20-24 years of age were consistently higher than rates for the total Queensland population. In the same time period in Queensland, nearly two thirds of all diagnosed cases of Chlamydia were aged 15-24 years of age. In Ipswich a study undertaken by Indigenous Sexual health-workers a total number of VSM users N=29 Total tested 27(93.1%) 20 (74%) positive for Chlamydia 6(22.2%) tested negative to Chlamydia.

When I look at data like this when you see Treated Index case 19(95%) then you realize that these health-workers did a very good job doing the follow up with these young people who were regular VSM users in Ipswich.

Williams F, Lieshout van T Kambul Medical Centre Ipswich Sexaul Health 2003

The highest rate occurred in 15-19 year old females. Being from a public health and health promotion background, there are a number of things that really hit you in the face "hello". These being harm minimization strategies, safe sex practices, and support for young people with mental health issues, especially in remote, rural and regional areas of Queensland. What we are seeing is the tip of the iceberg 15% above the surface with but what about the other 85% below ongoing support, future health, mental, well being and family concerns. This is the significant cost, which is not being factored in.

How we can as a collective of Youth workers, look at making a difference in our daily practices, and in saying that help, advocate, support, mentor, and our clients.

Background in Townsville / Thuringowa

When the Townsville / Thuringowa action group was formed in 2000 by Robyn Morgan and after it was identified as a major factor problem affecting young people in our region, I would say it was part and parcel of more sinister underlying factors. To put this in context as an Indigenous Health-worker in 2001 we saw an increase in HepC in Charters Towers, now for a place that doesn't take drugs or have sex this was happening. I was told do not worry about it, you are not employed to work in that area. I had worked with VSM users in the nineties and worked with the Justice groups in the gulf and cape and the Mid-west and chroming was what they called a transient thing don't worry about it to much, more important things to deal with like community service and getting young people to court.

With my work at Q Health, I started to notice that a lot of young people that were of this VSM group, were youth justice clients, either in or out of detention, risky behavior, high infection rates and regular VSM, alcohol and other drug users and if we treated the core infectors, our service could knock over the trifecta, I am not talking about racing. At a sexual health conference in Cairns with other health workers whether it be Mackay, Ipswich, Cairns, Townsville, Mount Isa all similar circumstances and with a successful contact tracing system we were able to treat and follow up our very transient clients and their partners.

So while we were doing our best with some opportunistic health checks and this was working, we still didn't have a holistic or intersectoral approach with community based Indigenous Health organizations and let me say this has improved considerably. Which gets me back on things in Townsville?

We are still making mistakes in the area of substance abuse and while a lot of the observations that I undertook in the past have shown that young people had access to a whole plethora of substances and were seen by many members of the public. Mainstream media had its part to play, with sensationalism or a real media beat up of these stories. Which achieve very little and more than often exacerbate the situation?

In 2005 its quite a different story, with users adopting a more undercover role, I will clarify that by saying going to houses in the suburbs and moving around and there are a number of places where they can and will go. While here in Brisbane, they still have their favorite haunts here in the Valley and the CBD.

Our refusal to confront this is a testament to the degree to which we insist on our ideological indulgences ahead of looking at marginalized young people who are caught up in substance abuse, homelessness and welfare and the dependency cycle. Why are our young people disengaging from education, sports & recreation in Townsville especially the Upper Ross a study by JCU academic Dr Glen Dawes and his team have come up with some interesting research?

External factors impacting on students including resources of family but also an obligation of young people to take on family carer roles or undertake part time work to supplement the family income.

Another common factor is linked to school disengagement was the high level of school mobility, with numerous enrolments at different schools. This is what you will see with Indigenous students from remote areas have to leave their community to finish high school and has a huge impact with numeracy and literacy issues.

Internal factors on students leaving school has limited access to career advice, and not feeling attached to their school also resulted in high

absenteeism. Another factor I looked at was school bullying not just with the boys but also with ever increasing numbers of girls participating.

We seem to be able to communicate more effectively to State and Local government and sometimes government listens. We are still seeing social breakdown, with single parents families, housing and infrastructure not improving and a government whether it be State or Federal hell bent on outcome driven funding and yes we do live in the smart state.

I would be the first to agree that changes to legislation to selling or procurement of paint is a step in the right direction and since the safe house project in Townsville has come on line and the change in which organizations are collaborating is a real positive sign for Townsville and Thuringowa.

I have focused on the so-called hot spots in Townsville / Thuringowa Garbutt, Vincent, Condon and Kelso because a lack of community planning and infrastructure in the past and putting families in these areas with lack of services has led to problems which are still being rectified today. Also lack of youth friendly places for young people in these areas as well as the cost to get into structured sports programs and being able to access cultural activities which are so important so that these young people knowing about their cultural identity.

Demographics in Townsville and Thuringowa

Firstly, if we look at the population growth right across Queensland especially around the coastal fringes you will see annual rate of about 4% or higher. So your needs in the area of provision of services, education, health, housing, roads is far greater and you also have a young population where a lot of these services are under funded or growth and usage by consumers out strips funding available creating more marginalized Y/P, who is extremely mobile and for example lets look at Thuringowa, which is part of the thriving metropolis of Townsville.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS2001)

Growth in this area suggests that 0-7 age group 7-15 age group 15-25 age groups, are growing, so what we will see is a snow balling effect where we have kids having kids and services to this region and services to this part of Townsville are being inundated and not able to cope, so we have a youth need, but a funding shortage not being able to deliver. With surveys, needs assessments, community groups a community organizations struggling not just in Queensland but right across Australia and really feeling the pinch with government departments and organizations becoming more outcomes driven and corporatised.

The population of the Twin cities is fast approaching the 200,000 mark with an Indigenous population of 10% and in saying that it is a relatively young population with the majority of the population 25<.

Average mortality rate for Townsville Indigenous 56.7 for males 68.5 for Indigenous females (**ABS 2001**).

When I first started keeping statistical data for VSM users back to 1993 there was a maximum of 15 who chromed regularly I knew of. In 1995 to 1998 I worked in remote and rural areas of Far Northern and Western Queensland so my observations were of those communities, I noticed that while I saw more petrol sniffers, than I saw VSM users, it was mainly when we had an influx of young people from other communities for example funeral, wedding or sporting events that we would see an escalation in numbers of young people chroming.

In Townsville and Thuringowa 2003 on a regular basis there were about 40 young people using more than three times a week about 60 who used once a week, with more females using than males this was about 70%, the reason behind this was that males had more opportunities to acquire alcohol, marijuana, amphetamines and other drugs. In 2002 and 2003 calls to Queensland Police in regard to chroming were extremely high with this number again tapering off over the last 12 months. I observed regular patterns in public areas and then more use of houses and parties: parks, Stockland late shopping night and bridge area, Murri Reserve Cranbrook South Townsville.

In 2005 the numbers of VSM users are still the same but they have an underground network where they meet up at houses in different suburbs and when it warms up they still venture to parks. The Thursday night at Stock land Shopping Centre is still huge.

Also with the older cohort of VSM users they usually congregate down around the drop inn centre and the CBD of Townsville. The numbers are <20 with an age range from (25-40) mostly Indigenous 90%.

AIC (2000) Locations for Inhalant Use, Australia, 1998: Australian Institute of Criminology

What is happening in Townsville and Thuringowa?

There are a number of youth agencies in Townsville and Thuringowa providing a range of services from numeracy, literacy, supported accommodation, legal advice, representation, court support, health, youth advocacy, support case management, after school programs but there are a number of barriers, which can be problematic, young people identified transport and costs associated.

I must say there has been some success with community renewal projects in parts of Townsville and Thuringowa, where community members have had opportunity to discuss matters with State government and about changes and development, in the areas of parks, community projects that have happened like giving people the access to the technology like internet that we take for granted and of course the Strand in Townsville and the River way project in Thuringowa and in saying that both Townsville / Thuringowa City Councils have made some very positive inroads into these areas with youth workers in the Vincent area initiating in consultation with youth groups with some very well supported activities.

The Townsville / Thuringowa Integrated Youth Program Lifeline in partnership with Magni Malu Kes a Torres Strait Island community based organization in Townsville, undertook a holiday program from December and January holiday period in 2004 and 2005 with a total number of 377 young people from identified areas of need. Upper Ross, Deeragun, Vincent, Garbutt and from Palm Island. It was well supported by young people and parents.

Another outcome was the opportunity for JCU students from Allied Health, Social work; Psychology students to be able to work with these young people out of a total number 90% were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. A needs assessment undertaken by the Thuringowa City Council looked at sports and recreation opportunities for Indigenous young people in the Upper Ross and young people they didn't want much, one of the major outcomes they wanted was sports and cultural activities on a regular basis on going basis.

These will be undertaken on a regular basis with planning underway for a trip to Laura Dance Festival in June and NAIDOC day have a go sports and cultural day in July.

The safe place trial, while this service has been going for a relatively short time, I feel this service is being underutilized and under valued by the community and while feed back and the evaluation process has not been completed, I feel there is a real for this service with the service providers and funding bodies really need to look at diversification and extension of the program to give more coverage to Townsville and Thuringowa. If it is to save the life of just one young person then it is money well spent?

In the future the safe place could be able to deal with drug and alcohol issues for young people and look at the Townsville safe place as a hub centre. With young people accessing the service from the West to Mount Isa and down to Mackay and Cairns servicing the Torres Strait Islands and the Cape and the Gulf.

In the Northern Territory by having centres set up closer to families, the out comes for clients was not only better and also huge savings in associated costs and travel plus culturally appropriate for young people with Indigenous health workers and youth workers trained and supporting their clients.

D'Abbs, P. Maclean, S. (2000)

In Townsville and Thuringowa, there is a lot that is happening in regard to interventions, sometimes ad hoc and with little evaluation or statistical evidence. I remember when the Townsville / Thuringowa Men's group, we had our first camp for VSM users in 2001, we nearly lost a couple a couple of these young people, a huge learning curb for the Men's group but nowadays we are more aware of health concerns and checks also proper risk assessments and documentation.

There have been a number of cultural camps and trips to the Torres Strait Islands and to Laura and other parts of Cape York, by other community based groups, which have been successful in giving these young people an opportunity to learn about their Murri and Torres Strait Island culture, but to ask some of these same young people, who are the traditional owners of Townsville or the proper name for Castle Hill (Cudtheringa), they did not know this and which I find quite sad.

If we look at the cycle for instance CYDC, young people who are VSM users are sentenced on other matters and sometimes this has saved their lives. What happens when this young person is released back to his family, peer pressure from friends to chrome/ alcohol/ speed/ yandi/ reality and probability says that this young person will chrome or use again.

Here in lies the solution anyway for remote / rural communities and that is the remoteness and out stations. We do not have that option in Townsville / Thuringowa.

Because if we treat the addiction or do we have an alternative or with the minimal amount of money that is spent in the areas of supported accommodation or rehabilitation and let me say there is still nowhere to send young people to break this habit in Townsville, I am sorry there is a five bed facility that is in Brisbane.

In developing community strategies in the Townsville / Thuringowa region, these should be aimed at creating an environment, of support, collaborative approach to dealing with issues in VSM use.

Where suppliers of VS are bought before the courts, with the new legislation and we need to send a strong message back to the community that with sly groing supply of VSM products won't be tolerated.

I am coming from a public health perspective; there are a number of factors that have to come into play the event VSM, timing VS being available, financial factor money to buy product, the need, and a number of significant factors, these being poly drug use alcohol, marijuana / yandi and combined with amphetamine usage IV/ oral. Substance abuse is psychosocially contagious epidemic and in saying that we just have to look at the strain of the mental health units and services in Queensland are under.

Recommendation 1

Looking at the feed back from young people, they really enjoyed these camps and activities were culturally appropriate and follow up with learning, numeracy, literacy, computer skills, arts, crafts and ongoing life skills and as well as a parenting program. The holiday camps also looked at activities that a number of these young people had never undertaken like snorkeling on magenetic island. Preparation of Kuppamurri. Next year look to white water rafting and repelling. Activities like these build up skills like team work, communication, reinforcing cultural learning and understanding.

Recommendation 2

A more collaborated approach with outreach programs, targeting high needs areas development of an MOU with the safe house / community based organizations. The reasoning behind this is that this service needs to be utilized with referrals from community based organizations. The development of community education programs targeting parents and carers and providing VS awareness to community organizations.

Collaboration of services, where you combine youth, health, welfare services and in saying that look to develop these youth houses or shop fronts where they are needed, for example we have been checking out houses for rent in a high needs area in the Northern Beaches (Deeragun) Thuringowa and Stock land Plaza Townsville with not much luck.

Mr. Glasgow spoke about the judicial system and roles and the importance that the justice groups play in our communities and some of the changes but the community support that is needed to continue the good work in the areas restorative justice.

If we look at what young people faced back then and to what they have now, while some might not agree with me, the issues are still the same, but Maybe we should confront the possibility that policy analysis and recommendations, for so long have been the cause, we only have to look at what has happened recently in Macquarie Fields and Redfern and the tragedy last year on Palm Island to name a few and then look at the demographics of Townsville / Thuringowa and see, what could happen there, if we don't have proper community consultation, looking at the issues, so common to us all in the community sector, transport, accommodation, professional development, funding.

In conclusion for me we have Commonwealth and State government that invests so much money in producing recommendations and policies and reports, yet we achieve very little improvement in delivery of service and outcomes for the Australian public, in areas of health, housing and education.

References

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