

Australian state government bows to media witchhunt on teenage paint sniffing

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Kowtowing to a media campaign against a well-known welfare agency, the Bracks Labor government in Victoria has shut down a rehabilitation program for disadvantaged and troubled teenagers involved in paint sniffing.

“Chroming”—the spraying of paint from an aerosol can into a plastic bag and then inhaling—has become the most common form of drug use among children and teenagers in Victoria. According to recent surveys, 24 percent of teenagers have tried inhalants at least once, with the highest users being children between 12 and 14 years old. Aboriginal and other groups are becoming increasingly concerned about the extent and impact of the practice.

While long-term studies on the physical affects of chroming are scarce, there are concerns that it can cause damage to vital organs, including the brain, sense organs, the liver and bone marrow. Moreover, the intoxicating effects of solvent fumes can lead to tragic accidents. During the past decade, 44 people, most of them young, have died from chroming in Victoria. In less than three years, between August 1998 and March 2001, ambulances attended 337 inhalant abuse cases in the Melbourne metropolitan area alone.

On January 21, a Victorian parliamentary committee on Drugs and Crime Prevention released a discussion paper entitled *Inquiry into the Inhalation of Volatile Substances*. The paper noted that inhaling was not illegal, explained that this was a complex social problem and outlined various different ways of dealing with it. The committee made no specific recommendations.

The following day, Murdoch’s right-wing tabloid, the Melbourne *Herald-Sun* ran a front-page “exclusive” story headlined “Safe Houses for Sniffing”. Sensationalising one aspect of the parliamentary paper, the article lambasted the efforts of a government-funded welfare agency, Berry Street, to rehabilitate teenagers involved in chroming. It claimed the agency had set up a network of “sniffing rooms” across the state, for children as young as 12, to get high on paint and glue fumes, while “adults watch”.

Later that morning, Victorian Labor Premier Steve Bracks

condemned the Berry Street program in an interview on talk-back radio. Bracks said the program was inappropriate and claimed that he and his Community Services Minister Christine Campbell had known nothing about it. It would be stopped, he vowed. His response provided the green light for the media beat-up to continue.

Opposition Liberal Party leader Denis Naphine followed Bracks, declaring there was no place in Victoria for supervised drug rooms, “whether they be chroming rooms or heroin-injecting rooms”. Naphine’s equation of the two issues was designed to oversimplify the problem of teenage sniffing, whip up emotive responses and reduce it to a question of “law and order.”

The next day, federal Liberal Family and Community Services Minister Amanda Vanstone weighed in to attack the Bracks government, demanding that guidelines be established to ensure that government money was not spent on controversial practices like “safe rooms for solvent sniffing”. Campbell immediately acquiesced. “The practice is out of step with public opinion and out of step with government policy,” she stated.

Within 24 hours, Bracks organised to overturn the government’s official policy of “harm minimisation”. If Berry Street did not comply, he said, it would lose its annual government funding of \$15 million.

Berry Street is the largest non-government organisation providing family welfare services in Victoria, with four centres in metropolitan Melbourne, and four in regional towns—Morwell, Seymour, Shepparton and Alexandra. It has operated for 125 years, assists 2,000 families each year and provides care for around 500 young people, including approximately 100 in supervised accommodation units. Many of the children are wards of the state, abandoned by their families and other welfare agencies.

Berry Street adopted the harm minimisation policy 18 months ago, in consultation with government officials and the police. The aim was to stop substance abuse by young people, while at the same time seeking to minimise the harm that abuse may cause. In its submission to the parliamentary

committee, Berry Street explained that high risk children are typically affected by poverty, child abuse, and family rejection. Other submissions pointed out that a disproportionately high number of Aboriginal youth use inhalants—and they use them more intensely and for a longer duration. While chroming is not regarded as physically addictive, long-term users can develop a strong psychological addiction.

Taking into account the history and needs of each user, strategies were developed, including counselling, education and alternative activities. In serious cases where the young person involved refused to stop chroming, a welfare worker would monitor or supervise them. This approach has, reportedly, met with success in breaking some young people from the habit.

Having forced a rapid about-face in government policy, the *Herald-Sun* demanded that Bracks sack Campbell, who continued to claim ignorance of Berry Street's "supervised chroming". In reality, she not only knew of the policy but her officials had praised it for its comprehensiveness in managing substance abuse. In May 2001, Campbell's department had awarded Berry Street a \$10,000 grant for its program. Campbell herself launched the harm minimisation policy, and Jenny Cumming, director of Berry Street's Southern Metropolitan and Gippsland Region explained it in an interview on ABC Radio.

In August 2001, Berry Street's program formally came to the attention of the Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee, comprised of four Liberal and three Labor MPs. But both parties already knew of it. In 1999, while in opposition, Campbell wrote to Denis Naphthine, then community services minister, raising concerns about chroming at Berry Street. Like Naphthine now, she had tried to use it as a political point-scoring exercise. When Naphthine was asked in parliament about Campbell's 1999 letter, he refused to answer.

Several agencies, including the Australian Drug Foundation, the Youth Substance Abuse Centre, the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Salvation Army drug program, publicly defended Berry Street against the media and parliamentary attack, insisting that the agency kept traumatised children alive.

In a press release, Berry Street CEO Sandie de Wolf commented: "We do not operate sniffing rooms and we do not condone the use of drugs of any kind. We are not talking about kids who are sniffing just because they want a kick. We are talking about kids who have suffered multiple traumas from abuse and rejection from their own families. We took the decision that it was better for the young person to actually be able to be there, to monitor them to try to keep them as safe as possible."

Chroming, de Wolf explained, was symptomatic of a

deeper problem. "That's what we've got to fix."

The media hysteria and subsequent enforced policy change at Berry Street had predictable consequences. Within hours of the program's cessation, two youth who refused to stop chroming were evicted from Berry Street and then involved in a car accident and hospitalised.

Nevertheless the *Herald-Sun* continued its campaign, denouncing any attempt to understand the broader social problems lying behind the increase in teenage chroming. The newspaper ridiculed welfare "orthodoxy," accused both the Labor and Liberal parties of being soft and weak on anti-social behaviour on the part of young people and railed against the "growth of extreme liberal attitudes since the 1960s".

Not to be outdone by the *Herald-Sun*, the traditionally liberal Melbourne *Age* published a guest column on January 29 by MP Susan Davies, one of three Independents who enable the minority Bracks government to retain office. Davies endorsed the *Herald-Sun*'s line, particularly targeting the "permissive treatment" of children in care. Her solution was incarceration in boot camps. "If kids who are under the legal authority of the state choose to wander the streets and buy drugs or solvents, we should remove their right to freedom of movement," she insisted.

The chroming issue has become a test case for abandoning wider notions of social welfare and reform, based on treatment, counselling and rehabilitation, in favour of punishment and retribution. With his eye to the forthcoming state election, Bracks has announced a cabinet reshuffle, including Campbell's demotion to a lesser portfolio. Admitting that her removal was a result of the "public outcry" over chroming, he effectively signalled his government would make a further shift to the right, running for re-election on the basis of a media-inspired law and order campaign.



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