

## **WPS DEVELOPMENTAL NOTE #67**

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### **THE TRIAL OF PROVIDING WORK IN A DRUG FREE ABATTOIR TO YOUNG INDIGENOUS PEOPLE WHO HAVE REGULARLY OR RECENTLY USED CANNABIS**

#### **Introduction**

This note introduces the trial of providing work in a drug free abattoir to young Indigenous people who have regularly or recently used cannabis. It will examine the author's belief that moderate users of cannabis will, in most cases, abstain from further use when provided with the right incentives and receive the proper support and supervision. This trial will also assist the Work Placement Scheme (WPS) to better profile young people who are suited to this line of work.

#### **Particulars of the trial**

This trial will offer selected young Indigenous people who have regularly or recently used cannabis, employment with TABRO Meats Pty Ltd as meat process workers in their Lance Creek abattoir. This offer will include a good regular award based income, good quality rental housing with their own bedroom, regular wholesome meals at cost, the company of friends and relatives, an increase in the quality of their social life and a much higher social status by living and working in the 'mainstream', It also offers the prospect of acquiring a nationally recognised qualification, plus professional support and supervision which includes education on the dangers of drug use. These services and potential benefits are provided on condition that participants abstain from further use of cannabis.

To enter this trial, participants have agreed to forgo their standard pre-employment urine drug test, in favour of regular blood drug tests that measure the level of cannabinoids (and other drug substances) over time. Should the level of cannabinoids decline to zero over the following three months they will retain their employment, subject to periodic urine tests thereafter. A stationary or an increase in the level of cannabinoids, is evidence of continuous drug use and they will be immediately dismissed from the abattoir. They will be returned to our fruit picking group at Robinvale or Renmark.

The number of young people to be included in this trial has not been defined, nor has the end date. This is due to the uncertainty in the number of suitable young people entering the Scheme, available housing, transport and supervision arrangements. There is also uncertainty in the number of available positions in the abattoir.

The cost of these drug tests will be borne by the WPS and the results will be shared with the management of TABRO Meats Pty Ltd. Progress reports will be written at 3 monthly intervals.

## **Discussion on context**

### **The extent of cannabis use by Aboriginals**

The 1994 National Drug Strategy Household Survey found the lifetime prevalence of illicit drugs for urban Aboriginals was 50 per cent. The proportion of urban Aboriginals who have used illicit drugs in the past 12 months was 24 per cent compared with 15 per cent in the general population (MCDS 2001). The 1998 National Drug Strategy Household Survey reported that 28 per cent of Aboriginal people used cannabis in the year before the survey (AIHW 1999). This suggests that cannabis use by Aboriginals is on the increase. There is very little research about the illicit drug use by rural and remote Aboriginals even though it is a known problem. Anecdotal reports suggest that in many communities, the majority of juveniles are regularly using cannabis. The Maningrida police in the Northern Territory estimated in 2004 that one-quarter of Centrelink payments were spent on cannabis (Andrews, 2005).

### **Loss of employment opportunities**

Cannabis users have fewer employment opportunities. Most workplaces are drug and alcohol free and many employers are now conducting pre-employment drug tests and random tests thereafter on all employees. This is due to the detrimental effects drugs have on work performance.<sup>[1]</sup> Those with positive readings usually have their application for employment rejected or their present employment terminated. This makes it difficult for the WPS, for it means that a number of employment opportunities are closed to the majority of WPS participants, due to their recent or regular use of drugs and alcohol.

### **Our experience with the fruit picking work groups**

The majority of WPS participants have a history of regular drug and alcohol use. The Scheme prohibits the use of these substances and uses a combination of proximity to the supply, loss of privileges, chores, loss or delay of work promotions, separation from the main group (time-out), counselling and fines for those who have breached this rule. Known breaches nearly always occur in groups. The frequency of breaches has a relationship to the level of support and supervision (which consists largely of education, monitoring and enforcement of the rules) they receive from work group supervisors, the blend of group members (group dynamics), the availability of substances, and the level of participant's disposable income.<sup>[2]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> The active compound of cannabis is delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (hereafter referred to as THC). THC is a difficult compound to classify. At low-to-moderate doses, THC is a mild sedative-hypnotic agent. Its pharmacological effects resemble those of alcohol and the anti-anxiety agents. High doses of THC may (in addition to sedation) produce euphoria, hallucinations, and heightened sensations - effects that are similar to a mild LSD experience. A concern with THC is that it leads to a gradually developing state of apathy, underachievement, loss of the work ethos, and a possible loss of goal direction. Other studies have found that people who used high doses of cannabis on a chronic basis, exhibited dullness, impaired judgment, loss of interest in personal appearance, poor hygiene, and some loss of memory.

<sup>[2]</sup> Drug and alcohol counselling has proven to be ineffective on these young people for a number of reasons. First and foremost, these young people do not see their level of use as harmful or a problem that warrants prohibition. Secondly, learning theory would have it that these young people are taught to consume alcohol and drugs. In the case of many Aboriginal families and communities, there is a high degree of permissiveness around drinking and drug taking, and people are taught that drinking and drug taking is a competitive, if not obligatory activity. A functional perspective on status, norms and roles takes this one step further and would argue that these young people drink in the manner they do because that is the way of Aboriginal people.

### **Earlier case examples**

At present, we have ten participants working for TABRO Meats. Two of these participants are officially part of this trial and more will be included over time. To get into this work group, participants must have a good overall attitude, proven good work performance in our Renmark or Robinvale fruit picking groups, and have stopped using drugs and alcohol.<sup>[3]</sup>

On the 10 January 2007, a 17 year old participant from the Cape York Peninsula community of Hopevale was referred to this abattoir work group. He expressed a strong interest in this line of work, claiming that his grandfather was a butcher and he wanted to follow in his grandfather's footsteps.

However, this young person had a history of regular cannabis use at home. He was caught smoking cannabis on three occasions while working in our fruit picking groups. He argued that his use of cannabis was due to peer pressure and that he would stop using cannabis, if he was allowed to join the abattoir group. He had a good reason to give it up and there was no peer pressure in this group to use cannabis.

His case was put to TABRO Meats and they agreed to give him the benefit of doubt. They waived the pre-employment drug test in favour of a post start monthly drug test. Two months into his employment he was caught smoking cannabis with a much older employee from the local community. He was immediately sacked and we sent him to our fruit picking group in Robinvale.

On the 10 March 2007, a 23 year old participant from Cairns was also referred to the abattoir group. He, like the 17 year old, was a well known regular user of cannabis. His general work performance was marginal and he only expressed a moderate interest in abattoir work. However, he agreed to refrain from further use of cannabis while in this job. This young man is still working at this abattoir. His work performance is improving and there is no evidence of him using cannabis.



**Jim Noland (Lance Creek Plant Manager) and Gregory Cox from Kalumburu**

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<sup>[3]</sup> All participants are forbidden to take drugs. Participants under the age of 18 years are forbidden to consume alcohol. Participants over the age of 18 years may consume alcohol but they cannot bring it back to their homes or caravan park and they cannot come home intoxicated or allow their drinking to interfere with their work performance.

### **Need for better assessment and support**

The majority of young people who join the WPS have a behavioural problem of one type or another. Some of these behaviours stem from congenital or acquired brain damage, while others are the result of two or more generations of passive welfare dependency, the breakdown of social norms, law and order, discipline and education. Other behaviours are simply the natural expressions of confused and restless youth, trying to find their place in the world.

There are many young Indigenous people from remote communities with a drug habit who would not last in a drug free work environment like an abattoir, even though they may express an interest in this line of work. Our challenge is to try and identify these young people beforehand.

This trial will add to our knowledge of how cannabis weakens motivation and disrupts incentives. The trial will also help to better profile young people who are suited to this line of work, and to assist them to obtain and maintain their employment within this industry.

### **Acknowledgements**

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**Lennard Peter from Cairns**

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