

LAW REFORM, DRUGS AND CRIME PREVENTION COMMITTEE
**Inquiry into the supply and use of methamphetamines, particularly ice,
in Victoria**

Mildura — 5 December 2013

Members

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Witnesses

Mr G. Pearse, Vice President, Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council
(SMECC).

The CHAIR — I call Mr Gary Pearse, vice-president of the Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council to come forward. As I do, I acknowledge the presence of Mr Peter Crisp, our parliamentary colleague and member for Mildura, here with us this afternoon. Thank you, Peter, for attending.

Mr PEARSE — Good afternoon, gentlemen. My name is Gary Alexander Pearse.

The CHAIR — Thank you for attending, Gary. I will read you the conditions under which you are speaking. I understand you are a police officer also?

Mr PEARSE — Yes. I am going to leave the police figures up to the boss.

The CHAIR — Okay. Welcome to this public hearing. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and is further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, the Defamation Act 2005 and, where applicable, the provisions of reciprocal legislation in other Australian states and territories. However, it is important that you note that any comments you make outside the hearing, including effective repetition of what you have said in evidence, may not be afforded such privilege. I understand you have received and read the guide for witnesses presenting evidence to parliamentary committees. I imagine you know it well anyway.

It is also important to note that any action which seeks to impede or hinder a witness or threaten a witness for the evidence they would give or have given may constitute and be punishable as a contempt of Parliament. We are recording the evidence and will provide a proof version of the transcript at the earliest opportunity, so you can correct it as appropriate. Given the speed of the introduction to the conditions, you will understand that time is our enemy at this stage.

Mr PEARSE — Yes.

The CHAIR — Without further ado I ask you to present to the hearing this afternoon, and thank you again for your time. I should have said that the hearing is in relation to the inquiry the committee is conducting into the supply and use of methamphetamines, particularly ice, in Victoria, and I am sure you will have read the reference associated with the inquiry.

Mr PEARSE — Yes, I am going to leave the official side to the boss. What I can do is talk on the personal side — from personal experience — plus also as the vice-president of the Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council. I was born and bred here, and I am a blocky's son — in other words, a viticulturist's son. I spent my first 19½ years working on the block as well as in the citizens military forces and whatnot, and then I went away to join the police force. I came back here approximately three years later, and I have spent the rest of my time here as a police officer. That is about as far as I am going to talk about the police.

When I grew up here out on the block, my neighbour across the road was Italian and my neighbour around the back was Yugoslavian. That was before that country was broken up and they all went their separate ways and now they call themselves by separate names. There was another Italian and a Greek over the road. My grandmother was renting from a Greek's premises in two or three different places, so I was well and truly multiculturalised at a young age. I went to the tech school here. My friends were Italian, Yugoslavian, you name it — except the Irish; we cannot stand the Irish! That is a joke. I am from a good Celtic background.

The CHAIR — I do not think that any of us here are Irish.

Mr CARROLL — I am.

The CHAIR — You are. Of course you are.

Mr PEARSE — Peter Byrne is the president; he is Irish too. He holds dual citizenship, and he is a solicitor as well — that is terrible!

The Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council first started out with the hailstorm that came through here approximately 30 years ago. It destroyed a lot of the blockies' crops for that year; a lot of them were Turkish growers. At that time we had around 600 Turkish families; they were the latest big increase of CALD people into the area at the time. They kicked off, and they were the second lot to start growing Indian hemp to get the resources and the funds to help them to make the payments for their blocks. They came in when blocks were worth a quid and they bought at top dollar. That really hurt them, and they kicked off from there.

The council was formed to assist the CALD people because there was no assistance, if you like, for CALD people in that predicament at the time to deal with insurance companies, relief and the whole lot. That was run by Denis Ryan, an ex-copper who wrote the book *Unholy Trinity* — a great bloke. It kicked off from there. At the time there were about five different community groups on the council. My involvement was with Operation Ethos in the early 1980s. They came up to brief us on that and start assimilating the government organisations into dealing with CALD people. I went out there with him one night, because they asked the most questions of him, and Nick recommended me to be a liaison officer there. From then on it has grown, and I have stayed with the community. That was 30-odd years ago.

At the moment we have quite a few people through. We have approximately 20 groups associated with the Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council as financial members. I will give a quick rundown of the members. At the moment the Afghan community is around 500, and they are mainly the Hazara people. The Burundians run to about 80 to 100; the Sri Lankan community between 50 and 70; the Tongan community between 100 and 150; and the Pacific Islanders — Solomon Islanders, Cook Islanders, Tongans and Samoans — are up at around 400. There are about 50 Fijians and 100 Samoans. With the Indian community we have about 200 to 300. You find a lot of them in the medical services, plus they are also in the fast-food outlets — 7-Eleven and those sorts of places. There are around 50 of the Gujrati community here. The Turkish community has dropped off a bit and it is running at about 400, and the Sudanese community is between 100 and 120. Most of the Italians are assimilated Australians — they call themselves Australians — but there are still a few, around 200. That is a rough figure of those who have not taken up citizenship.

There is a small group of Congolese of 15, which is kicking off. The Vietnamese community is between 50 and 70; the Iranian community around 20, mainly single men; the Iraqi community around 50, are also mainly single men. Cambodians are situated up through the Robinvale area. There were 80 Cambodians, but I do not know what the figure is at the moment because we are getting mixed messages. We have had the Chinese community here for over a century. I can remember my old man being chased by the local Chinese greengrocer having tried to pull his pigtail and that sort of thing. They have been here for a long time. The Japanese community, mainly wives, have picked up in this area, and there are about 30 of them. As I said, the Indian community comprises about 200 or 250.

When they come out here the CALD communities mainly stick to what they are used to in their own countries. If they are in to drug dependence or drug use, it is the traditional drugs. Indian hemp or ganja covers most of them. The Pacific Islanders like their kava. The Indian and Afghan communities use the hookah pipes and whatever they put in the hookah pipes — cannabis resin and that sort of stuff. With methamphetamines you are basically looking at the younger generation — the teenagers. They are the ones who experiment with that. They are not using the old stuff. It is a social, recreational drug and they are going out and using it.

I have an extended family with a de facto wife. As part of the extended family I have two drug dealers who operate with methamphetamines — ice, whatever you like. One of them was one of the top drug dealers in this area for many years. The other one is a social drug dealer supporting her habit. She is also of the Aboriginal race. We look after her sons and daughter on a temporary basis for six or eight months; it changes around. We are currently looking after her niece, who is very much like her mother. One of the other boys was using drugs, stealing cars, burglary and everything like that. At the moment he is living with his grandmother, and he has been straightened out a bit. I have a fair bit of knowledge and experience in that sort of stuff. The cousin has been involved in a couple of serious motor collisions, and he is still recovering from one. He is on the

government benefits, and he is using whatever he can get — OxyContin, ice. If he can inject it, he will inject it — the whole lot. He is roaming around town doing his deals and the whole lot while he has got a busted up leg. It is still open down to the steel plate; you can see in the shins. There is a fair bit involved in there.

Back to the CALD community, the older people — that sort of stuff — no, they would basically call community. They get involved in the growing of the drugs — Indian hemp, that sort of stuff. The methamphetamine and that sort of stuff has been by the younger members of the community. We had a recent incidence. One of the Iranian boys refused to work or whatnot. He was cut off from the department of immigration assistance package. He came up and threatened suicide. When we went down and talked to the other Iraqi boys who were staying in the old park motel down on Eighth Street, they said, 'He is a bit of a standover merchant. He is starting to deal in drugs'. He was working with one of the Iraqi work contractors then and the crew that they were working with. We put him up for a night and told him he was on his own and he had to sort out where he went, and that is it. He was 20 or 25 years of age. He is out here on a bridging visa, and I think the government is still looking at whether they are going to let him stay or go. That is where it comes from there.

Usually they prey upon their own communities, because they know how they operate, and that is about it. But very little ice is emerging at the moment, but it will emerge later on as the younger teams get a hold of it. It is what I have seen all the way through. A new community comes out here, they get along fairly well — apart from a split off on the government benefits that can dump them in housing and that sort of thing. The others make a go of it. Unfortunately a lot of the times they buy in at the top market value, and they cannot keep up and they cannot get a resource, and they cannot get their funding from what they have bought into, so they look for alternative means. Drug dealing is one of those means. The traditional drug dealing — opiates, heroin and that — has been going along. That is still very low, but it is not that heavy at the moment. The main thing is the methamphetamine and the artificial drugs, if you like — the core with that. That is where it is at the moment, where you would expect to see that problem coming up later on.

What the CALD community and the Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council are trying to do is information packages. That is about what we have got. We mainly cater for the Afghani, Burundian, Sri Lankan, Iranian and Iraqi people who are here, because they are the new ones — not assimilating; integrating. Assimilation means taking over. With integrating they still retain their identity and their traditions, but they can integrate with the rest of the community here, therefore we have now expanded the knowledge base and better community. We develop better from it.

You have got to link in with that family violence. We run information sessions for family violence in the community. As you will notice, many of these communities that are coming up here are male dominated. If the male is not able to get the work, then the frustrations go through the whole family and community. We run information sessions to cancel that out. We explain to them that they have come to a new country for new things and that they need to adopt some of those the same way as we adopt their traditions and cultures and the whole lot too. We are working and running them regularly.

Unfortunately we have no detox centre up here. If any person needs to go for detox, they have got to go away, which is an impost on the family. We have no prison up here, so the families have to travel away to visit their people, so that is an extra burden and an extra cost on the families. They have got to go by bus over to Swan Hill. Most of them cannot use the plane, because it is too dear. We do not have a passenger train here, full stop.

That is about it. We are running pretty well. As for accommodation here for the people, we use private accommodation and everything. We do not use Haven, we do not use department of housing or whatever. For the community to say that they raise problems, we have got people up in the Dip Tin on Deakin — or the Birdcage, as it is called. That is not on; we do not have anyone in any public housing whatsoever. We use private housing right through. That way at least the locals are getting money back from their tax returns, if you like, because the government assists these people. Part of that is the rent — part of the rent gets paid back to the private owners who own the private rental. That is it.

Mr McCURDY — Gary, how many of the issues do you think are related to the remoteness up here? You have spoken a lot about having to go away for lots of things. It is obviously a contributor. Is it more significant — —

Mr PEARSE — If you like, many people call Mildura the north-west frontier — the oasis of the north. Mildura is unique in that it is the only city bordering two other states. Funding or that sort of thing, whenever we deal with the people around here and that, they seem to think there is a Berlin Wall running down the middle of the Murray River and running along the South Australian border. It is not. People here go backwards and forwards all the time. Constantly we see people changing their address. They will come over here, and then they will move over to Buronga or Gol Gol, and then they come back again. They will go over to Renmark and whatnot, and then they come back here. Yes, it feels like we are remote. The argument is that we believe up here, especially with the CALD and whatnot, that we are a big enough region to be able to become our own region instead of being linked to Bendigo.

We get a lot of meetings where the people say, 'We are holding a forum at Bendigo to assist you to get here'. It is a 4½-hour drive from here to Bendigo; it is a 1½-flight to Melbourne. You would be doing us a favour by holding your forums in Melbourne, because of the distance — the tyranny of distance, if you like to call it that. There is nothing in government resources here to get in a car and go visit the spot — do 4 hours or 5 hours there and come back again, making a 12 to 16-hour day. The remoteness problem is there, but the other problem, as I have said, is that it is the only city that is bordering on two other states. People come here for assistance where they are not getting it over the river or they are not getting it because there is no local content there. They have got to go to the capital cities to get it. That is what we find here. We get a lot of our clients coming from over the river because we are all in the Sunraysia area.

Mr SCHEFFER — Thanks for your presentation, Gary. You said that the older members of the various CALD communities were using traditional recreational drugs but the new generation is starting to buy into the methamphetamine market.

Mr PEARSE — Yes, the young ones.

Mr SCHEFFER — What is the dynamic going on inside the various communities, because they must be as aware as anybody else of the potential dangers in that?

Mr PEARSE — Yes. That is what the information centres are for. The family is suffering a breakdown because the kids have been exposed to a complete new way of life. They have got more freedoms than what they had overseas, and when they come out here they are getting up and they are demanding those freedoms. Part of that is, 'Dad, sit down, I don't want to listen to you; I will do my own thing'. We get the problems. They come to us and say, 'I can't do anything with my son. What do we do?'. We ask what he is doing, and he says, 'He is going out at night', or, 'He is seeing women', and a whole lot. You have got to say, 'You have got to rely on and trust me. You have got to move on. You are in a new country — new rules. You came here for those reasons, so you have got to accept that part. Don't be too tight on the kids. Give them the good old moral values but not the associated penalties if they don't comply with the old moral values'.

Mr SCHEFFER — But the numbers in those groups you mentioned — Congolese, Iranians, Iraqis — are very small.

Mr PEARSE — Yes, they are, because they move on.

Mr SCHEFFER — Yes, but it is a bit hard to get a momentum of conversation supporting that, isn't it?

Mr PEARSE — That is right. Most of the, as I said, Iraqi community and the Iranian community and that are mostly the young men coming off the boats. They are moving on, but they are coming back to us to get the family visas and get their families out here. I had to settle with an Afghani family the other day, and he has 16 kids and 16 grandkids. Half of them went to Austria because they forgot to put the 'L' in — half of them went to Austria instead of Australia. They are out here, and they are in the same problem of trying to assimilate with that. He cannot work. He is

70; he is a pensioner. He is not going to work for the rest of his life, so we are going to carry him; the Australian people are going to carry him because of his age and that. He has had a stroke. The young sons are trying to find a job and the whole lot. Jobs up here in the industries are all agrarian industries, and they have all gone downhill. Boom!

Mr SOUTHWICK — Are most of the communities you are referring to fragmented? Do any of them have more of an organised structure where they get together for cultural events and what have you?

Mr PEARSE — The Turkish community does. The Greek community does. They have the olive fest, which has started up and has been pretty successful. In the old days we used to have a Christmas picnic out at Lake Cullulleraine, but that was supported by the shire council funding. When that died, it died.

Mr SOUTHWICK — Of those communities, did they have a strategy, if you like, to educate or to tackle drug issues amongst themselves in any way, shape or form?

Mr PEARSE — No. Mainly they come to us for the advice and the information sessions. We put the information sessions together and give it out to them, or we include, as the boys before were talking about, the ice forums they have here. I believe there are about eight of those forums, of which there are half more to go. They are down there at Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council, but they are in English and a lot of our people still have not been able to transfer over to the English. We have adult English here. We have the TAFE English this year. We are trying. We are working hard to get them to get basic English language so they can get by.

The CHAIR — Gary, we might have to leave it there. We are running short of time.

Mr PEARSE — That is fair enough.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for making your time available this afternoon to provide evidence to this hearing. We will certainly provide you with the report once it is finalised and tabled in Parliament in the middle of next year, which we are aiming for. Thank you.

Mr PEARSE — No worries. Thank you very much indeed for listening.

Witness withdrew.