

# Setting a conservative policy agenda

## The Victorian print media, young people in care and chroming

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*The tabloid print media has played a crucial role in recent Australian social policy debates, particularly those pertaining to drug use and child and adolescent welfare. Much of the media's contribution has been around promoting simplistic and often conservative solutions to complex social problems.*

*This article examines the recent media-inspired furor over so-called 'safe-sniffing' practices in a Victorian welfare agency. It is acknowledged that other forms of media such as talk back radio may have had influential roles, as might other factors also. Particular attention, however, is drawn here to the Herald Sun's role in this affair, and to similarities with its intervention in earlier policy debates. Some comparisons are also drawn with the coverage of the affair by the Age and the Australian.*

*It is argued that the Herald Sun's specific campaign on chroming reflects a broader conservative agenda to undermine progressive social policy interventions including harm minimisation. This agenda may have significant implications for the Victorian community welfare sector given the tendency of politicians – whether in government or opposition – to bow to the demands of the tabloid media.*

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The media plays an important role in setting the public policy agenda. Much of this role arguably involves influencing public attitudes and values in a particular political or ideological direction. Given factors such as the narrow ownership of the mass media, and commercial interest in what appeals to the target audience, there appears not surprisingly to be a significant bias in favour of neoliberal ideas (Argy, 1998, pp.224-225).

Sometimes, the media has been successful in promoting systemic and structural reform agendas involving socially equitable policy outcomes. But more often than not, the media has been poor at exploring social issues such as unemployment and homelessness. Often, the media seems to reinforce conservative explanations of and solutions to social problems. The media also seems to have contributed to an increasing tolerance of social inequality and poverty (Windschuttle, 1988; Beresford et al, 1999; Putnis, 2001).

The media's preference for socially conservative policy agendas applies to a variety of issues, and it has been particularly apparent in the areas of drug use, and child and adolescent welfare.

For example, the Victorian tabloid newspaper, the *Herald Sun*, seems to have played a prominent role in destroying proposed drug law reforms pertaining, firstly, to the decriminalisation of marijuana, and, later, to the introduction of supervised injecting facilities (Penington, 2000). Similarly, it has been argued that the Sydney tabloid paper, the *Daily Telegraph*, was influential in destroying federal government support for the ACT's proposed heroin prescription trial (Elliott & Chapman, 2000; Lawrence, Bammer

& Chapman, 2000; Hoare, 2001). Internationally, the media appears to have been significant in framing drug use narrowly as a law and order issue, and generating support for the so-called 'war on drugs' (Beckett & Sasson, 1998).

On the particular issue of chroming, much of the media reporting has been exaggerated, emotive and sensationalist. For example, the media has erroneously reported that experimental use of solvents leads inevitably to addiction and severe brain damage, and that users are likely to commit violent crimes (Rose & Midford, 1994; Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee (DCPC), 2002, pp.117-118).

Much media reporting of child and adolescent welfare issues has also been sensationalist and simplistic. For example, coverage of child abuse and child protection debates has tended to divert attention from the overall child welfare system to a few individual and not necessarily representative cases, and to prioritize the identification of scapegoats. This coverage also has a broader social conservative political agenda, which is to defend traditional institutions and values such as the family, rather than being primarily concerned with identifying necessary structural and systemic reforms to child welfare policies and legislation (Franklin & Parton, 2001).

Media reporting often appears to reflect what has been described as a 'moral panic'. According to this notion, societies are exposed every now and then to threats to traditional institutions and values. These threats are then attributed by the media to allegedly deviant or subversive groups which Stanley Cohen (1980) calls 'folk devils'. The 'folk devils' are then isolated and censured by

the media in order to reinstate and reaffirm the traditional social values the group was judged to transgress (Beckett & Sasson, 1998, p.28; Mendes, 2000, p.53).

The *Herald Sun* has been particularly notable in this regard with its emphasis on defending traditional nuclear families from allegedly subversive or deviant groups such as incompetent and/or authoritarian state social workers or, alternatively, individually abusive parents (Mendes, 1997, pp.186-187; Mendes, 2000; Mendes, 2001a).

Such reporting tends to provoke 'knee-jerk' policy responses by governments which address the media pressure, rather than the actual needs of service users. This has been aptly termed 'legislation by tabloid' (Goddard & Saunders, 2001, p.1). It is argued that a good example of this was the 1993 introduction of mandatory reporting by the Victorian Government as an intended cure-all for child abuse (Mendes, 1996, pp.28-29).

Another example was the NSW Carr Government's immediate closure of a Sydney needle exchange program following a (false) media allegation that it had provided injecting equipment to a 12-year-old boy (Swain, 1999, p.1). As we shall see, the Bracks Government's reaction to the *Herald Sun*'s campaign on chroming followed a similar pattern.

### WHAT IS CHROMING?

Chroming is a form of volatile substance abuse, and involves the inhaling of spray-can fumes. The toxic fumes of the inhalants slow down the activity of the brain and central nervous system. Users feel uninhibited and excited, then drowsy. Many young people experiment with chroming due to its pleasurable effects including euphoria, and an initial and rapid high that resembles drunkenness. Others use chroming to mask their emotional pain. Chroming is most common amongst young people aged 12-14 years. Chroming can have serious health consequences. Short-term side effects may include flu-like symptoms, diarrhoea, vomiting, nosebleeds, and sores around the mouth and nose. Long-term or chronic chroming can produce depression, burst blood vessels, and damage to the brain, nervous system, lungs, kidneys and liver. Deaths can occur when chromers are 'high' from

suffocating on plastic bags, or choking on vomit whilst unconscious, or from being involved in an accident. A total of 44 deaths in Victoria over the last ten years have been associated with inhalant use (DCPC, 2002, pp.9-20, 25-28, 35-36 & 42-43).

Nevertheless, there is no consensus about the precise medical or social consequences of chroming. This is particularly the case regarding long-term brain damage. The recent Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee (2002) report concludes equivocally:

It is probable that although some types of damage are recoverable, others, to a degree, will be cumulative with increased exposure and, perhaps, irreversible. Those substances which stay in the body for a long time may pose greater dangers of tissue damage than substances which are rapidly eliminated in the breath (p.19).

There are currently no legal restrictions on chroming in Victoria, and most inhalants are commonly available household products. The DCPC (2002) report notes significant divisions over the efficacy of restricting access to volatile substances (pp.89-93).

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### BERRY STREET AND CHROMING

The Victorian child and family welfare agency, Berry Street, works with some of the most damaged and abused young people in the Victorian substitute care system. The tough challenges faced by Berry Street in working with this group of young people are perhaps best understood by reference to a 1999 Department of Human Services report

titled 'When care is not enough' (Morton, Clark & Pead, 1999).

This report examined the care needs of ten young people in the Victorian care system who had experienced severe physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and neglect in their families of origin. As a result, these young people exhibited severe post-traumatic symptoms including emotional disturbance and attachment disorder problems. For example, they consistently engaged in high risk behaviour involving a serious risk of harm to themselves and/or to others including escalating drug use, prostitution, suicide attempts, and crime. The report also noted that conventional substitute care and treatment had generally failed to effectively address the impact of childhood trauma (Morton, Clark & Pead, 1999).

### Substance Use Policy

As a result of its significant experience with adolescent substance abuse, Berry Street published a Substance Use Policy in May 2001 (Limbrick, 2001). The report was based on 18 months of extensive consultation with other welfare agencies, police, drug abuse experts and the Department of Human Services.

The Policy was explicitly underpinned by the key principles of harm minimisation, and emphasised the reduction of the adverse consequences of problematic substance use for the individual and the community without necessarily eliminating that use (pp.25-26). For example, the harm reduction objective could be abstinence, or continuation of substance use with reduced chaos and risk, or involve dealing with other related behavioural issues. The principal focus would be on improving the safety, health and well-being of the substance user (p.34).

The Policy specifically recommended the encouragement of substance-free lifestyles (p.26), but also noted that some young people might refuse to cease their substance use. For example, if confronted about their use, they may either leave the service, or continue to use in secrecy, or tell workers 'where to go'. When faced with such resistance, workers were advised to focus on the best health outcome for the individual, rather than taking a legal or moral position on substance use (p.36).

Berry Street's policy document was praised by the Department of Human Services (DHS), and received a Best Practice Initiative Grant (DHS, 2001, pp.8-9). Two weeks after the Minister announced the grants, Berry Street conducted a workshop for DHS and other human service organisations at which a case study was presented as an example of how to apply this substance use policy to chroming. A senior Berry Street Manager, Jenny Cummings, also spoke in detail about the monitored chroming practice on ABC radio.

Berry Street elaborated on these policies in its submission to the Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee inquiry into the inhalation of volatile substances. The DCPC report, published in January 2002, reproduced six case studies from Berry Street. The studies revealed a range of strategies used by Berry Street to minimise harm to young chromers. They included engagement with a range of specialist support services, education, removal of the substance, and monitoring of use as part of the application of harm minimisation principles. Some of these strategies were highly effective and led to the reduction or cessation of substance use. Others did not (DCPC, 2002, pp.61-71).

The DCPC report noted that the monitoring of chroming was considered to be a 'contentious' practice by many experts (pp.112-117). However, they also noted Berry Street's view that a more punitive policy was likely to lead to young people engaging in dangerous and potentially fatal behaviour whilst chroming. Berry Street argued that their strategies were aimed at reducing the amount of chroming, and encouraging chromers to use in safer environments (p.112)

In a later press release, Berry Street clarified that the monitoring practice was only used as 'an absolute last resort' in 'extreme and rare cases' with chronic users. These users would otherwise chrome in potentially dangerous environments such as railway stations, parks, underpasses, and storm water tunnels. In contrast, monitoring of chroming on the Berry Street premises involved providing the young person with physical and medical care and support if required. It did not in any way involve condoning or reinforcing chroming. Rather, users were 'constantly

reminded and advised that his or her actions were dangerous, undesirable, and should cease' (Kirk & de Wolf, 2002).

In a further media report, Jenny Cummings from Berry Street emphasised that staff monitored the sniffing, encouraged the users to hand over their cans and have breaks, and offered information and support. In cases where young people remained chronic users, alternative methods such as hospital admission, detoxification or placement in secure welfare were considered (*Herald Sun*, 23 Jan. 2002, p.5).

Following the publication of the DCPC report, the *Herald Sun* accused Berry Street of operating 'safe sniffing houses' for young chromers akin to supervised injecting houses for heroin users. The Victorian ALP Government then ordered Berry Street to immediately cease its practice of supervising young people engaged in chroming on its residential premises.

The government took this action without investigating whether or not the strategies used by Berry Street were actually effective in minimising harm to substance users. This response was described as a 'knee-jerk reaction' by the authoritative Australian Drug Foundation (Stronach, 2002a). However, after some initial resistance, Berry Street indicated that they would defer to this directive, and develop alternative strategies for dealing with chroming.

Subsequently, the *Herald Sun* called for the resignation of the Minister for Community Services, Christine Campbell, alleging that she had known about the supervised chroming for two years, but had failed to take any action. They also called for the immediate banning of the sale of inhalant products to children. However, these campaigns were unsuccessful.

### THE HERALD SUN CAMPAIGN

In the author's opinion, the Murdoch-owned *Herald Sun* is Victoria's most influential newspaper, and has an average daily circulation of 555,000 readers. It appeals to populist blue-collar or socially conservative views on social issues, and has long been seen as overtly sympathetic to the Liberal Party.

Over a two week period from late January till early February 2002, the

*Herald Sun* published approximately 30 articles on the chroming issue. This included three front page stories, and six editorials. There was also a large number of letters to the editor. Only one feature article and one brief report presented the perspective of Berry Street, and no material appeared from the Minister or representatives of the government.

The *Herald Sun's* campaign was characterised by extreme sensationalism. The first report featured on January 22 accused Berry Street of operating 'a network of special sniffing areas in children's homes across the state'. It added that chroming can cause brain damage, seizures and even instant death, and suggested that children as young as seven were being taught how to minimise the harmful effects of sniffing. Reference was then made to a number of sources critical of this policy including MacKillop Family Services, the Open Family Foundation, and the Royal Children's Hospital (*Herald Sun*, 22 Jan. 2002, pp.1 & 6).

The implication of this report was that Berry Street was operating a network of specialist structured safe sniffing rooms akin to the proposed safe injecting rooms for heroin users. Yet, this was clearly not the case, and there was no information in the DCPC report to suggest that this was occurring. Nor was there any evidence that children as young as seven years were involved. Noticeably, the initial newspaper article was prepared without any consultation or contact whatsoever with Berry Street or the government (Kirk & de Wolf, 2002).

Subsequent reports continued this attempt to promote a 'moral panic' around the issue. Many of these reports contained characteristics similar to those prevalent in earlier *Herald Sun* campaigns around child welfare (Mendes, 2000, p.56) including the following:

- 1) The use of emotive terms such as 'parents will be shocked', 'disturbing revelation', and 'appalling message' (*Herald Sun*, 22 Jan. 2002, p.18), and 'there's a sniff of despair' (*Herald Sun*, 7 Feb. 2002).
- 2) The advocacy of simplistic and immediate solutions to this complex social problem such as the resignation or sacking of the

Minister, and the banning of the sale of glues and paints to children (*Herald Sun*, 22 Jan. 2002, p.18; 31 Jan. 2002, p.20).

- 3) The search for individual scapegoats such as Berry Street, the Minister for Community Services, Health Minister John Thwaites, and later, academics who had dared to question the *Herald Sun*'s mishandling of the affair (6 Feb. 2002).
- 4) The use of evidence from sources which, in the author's view, are highly contentious and whose bona fides or motivations were never questioned, such as a former Berry Street employee, Chris Scandolera; anonymous bureaucrats; and City of Mornington Councillor, youth worker, and aspiring Liberal Party candidate, Reade Smith.
- 5) The reaffirmation of the primacy and privacy of the family sphere by contrasting the views of distraught parents opposed to chroming with the apparent tolerance of welfare professionals (*Herald Sun*, 24 Jan. 2002, p.4). Yet, no probing questions were asked about any past actions of these parents which may have contributed to their child's entry into substitute care, and their associated self-harming behaviour.

Perhaps most insidious was the subtle attempt to use the chroming affair to discredit harm minimisation policies in general. For example, columnist Paul Gray argued that the majority of Australians favoured an abstinence-based approach to drug use (*Herald Sun*, 29 Jan. 2002, p.19). Similarly, Sally Morrell suggested that carers should 'just say no' to chromers (*Herald Sun*, 6 Feb. 2002). A *Herald Sun* editorial was even blunter, calling for harm minimisation to be replaced by a policy of 'total abstinence' which is 'what a majority of Victorians want' (*Herald Sun*, 8 Feb. 2002).

Both Gray and Morrell used prohibitionist language analogous to that of Prime Minister John Howard (Mendes, 2001b). They depicted chroming as a matter of morality and responsibility which required a return to traditional social values such as the setting of tighter boundaries for young people. Neither envisaged substance abuse rather as a public health issue

influenced by broader social factors and conditions.

Morrell entered into even more overtly political territory, arguing that controversial policies such as supervised chroming should be automatically subjected to parliamentary debate and vote (*Herald Sun*, 6 Feb. 2002). In this author's view, Morrell's overt agenda was presumably to ensure that the conservative Liberal and National Party majority in the Victorian Upper House would have the right of veto over any chroming policies just as they did with the ill-fated supervised injecting facilities legislation. However, her argument also implies a potentially more dangerous and hidden agenda of subjecting all child and adolescent welfare service initiatives to the veto of the vocal social conservative minority.

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In a review of the *Herald Sun*'s campaign, Bill Stronach from the Australian Drug Foundation commented that news providers have a 'social responsibility' in reporting drug issues not to 'create greater community or individual harm'. He suggested that the presentations by the *Herald Sun* had produced 'harmful, undesirable and counterproductive outcomes' including community panic, knee-jerk responses by government, and potentially 'an increase in chroming by impressionable and vulnerable kids' (Stronach, 2002b).

#### OTHER NEWSPAPER REPORTS

As in previous child welfare debates (Mendes, 2000, pp.57-58), the two quality newspapers, the *Age* and the *Australian*, tended to offer a more balanced and sober analysis of the issue.

The *Age*, which has an average daily circulation of 191,000 readers, published

approximately 15 articles over the two week period including two Editorials.

The Editorial tone was critical of the supervised chroming policy, and agreed with the government's decision to prohibit its continuation. In particular, the paper argued that harm minimisation as in the proposed supervised injecting facilities could only apply to adults. In contrast, adult carers needed to take responsibility for minors (*Age*, 24 Jan. 2002, editorial).

However, the paper criticised the 'demonisation' of Berry Street for adopting an approach that was known to both the Department of Human Services and the police. Reports also noted that the policy enjoyed wide support from many medical and welfare professionals including the Australian Medical Association, the Youth Substance Abuse Service, the Salvation Army, and Jesuit Social Services (*Age*, 23 Jan. 2002; 28 Jan. 2002). In addition, they published a sympathetic interview with five leading Berry Street carers (*Age*, 31 Jan. 2002).

Overall, the *Age* focused much greater attention than the *Herald Sun* on the social factors behind chroming, and the need to identify solutions that reflected the social and peer context of the young people. Far less attention was given to legal issues such as the potential effectiveness of a ban on the sale of inhalant products to minors.

In addition, the *Australian* (a NSW-based paper which produces a Victorian edition) published six articles on the affair. The Editorial tone was critical of supervised chroming (*Australian*, 25 Jan. 2002), but space was also given to supporters of the policy including most notably the Australian Drug Foundation.

#### CONCLUSION

The recent debate over chroming demonstrates that the tabloid media continues to exert a significant influence on social policy outcomes. In addition, the *Herald Sun*'s particular intervention in this debate was marked by the same common social conservative agenda prevalent in earlier campaigns around drug use, and child and adolescent welfare policies.

The evidence from these earlier campaigns is that inflammatory and inaccurate headlines do not produce

rational debate, nor do they lead to good practice or policy outcomes. Rather, they encourage the introduction of simplistic and generally ineffective solutions that ignore the broader social and structural factors contributing to the problem. Such government responses (as reflected in the Bracks Government's knee-jerk closure of the Berry Street initiative) do not inspire the development of new, innovative, possibly unorthodox and contentious, and potentially more effective, programs by the community welfare sector. On the contrary, the sector is left feeling intimidated and unsupported.

To be sure, the media has had and retains a potentially important role to play in bringing the weaknesses of social policies around drugs and child and adolescent welfare to public attention. However, the agenda currently pursued by the *Herald Sun* appears to be too skewed by factors such as sensation seeking, commercial interest and ideological prejudice to be either responsible or constructive. The Victorian Government should give greater credence to sounder forms of enquiry, to the more balanced reports in the other two daily newspapers, and to the views of professional and community experts in these areas. ♦

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