WHO IS TO BLAME?

Not a day seems to go by that we are not reminded, many would say confronted, with media reports of street violence, assaults and other types of unruly behaviour which all too often result in serious injuries, including brain damage, and in some cases death.

In this context I read with interest an article in the Herald-Sun several months ago which included quotes by the father of a young man who was seriously injured and suffered irreversible brain damage following an altercation outside of a nightclub in the Melbourne CBD. I have no doubt that many (if not most) of those who read this article, and numerous similar reports, would be sympathetic with the victims, and their families, and angry with the perpetrators, and of the view that they need to be apprehended, charged and punished.

However, I am not nearly as confident that the measures that were recommended by the father of the young man and based on call in programs and media articles and by numerous others, are the answer to the problem; a problem which is now becoming all too common, and which has generated a considerable amount of discussion and debate as well as suggestions for solutions, by a range of agencies and individuals. Recommendations made by the victim's father and others, include changes to regulations, an increase in police numbers, changes to police procedures practices, and alterations to hours that venues can serve alcohol and a number of others related to these. In my opinion, each of these is focused on addressing the symptoms and not the underlying problems.

The majority of those speaking for and supporting victims, appear to be of the assumption that attendance at night clubs, including the consumption of large quantities of alcohol, and the behaviour that accompanies it, is now the norm in our society, similar to attendance at cultural events, sporting events, going to work, and other routine activities engaged in by large sections of our community on a more or less regular basis. This being the premise, they come to the conclusion that as most of these activities are relatively safe and the subject of government regulations, (safe work practices, occupational health and safety etc) that those attending night clubs are entitled to the same safe environment and that the government has an obligation to ensure that a similar degree of safety is required to be provided for those who frequent nightclubs and other types of venues where large amounts of alcohol is consumed.

These recommendations, while attractive, are not only far from achievable in my opinion, nor are they defensible. Attending night clubs and consuming alcohol are both lifestyle choices and those that choose these need to be aware of the consequences that accompany those lifestyle choices.   It is not dissimilar to those who choose to smoke, climb high mountains, or engage in a variety of 'extreme sports'. Each of these is a lifestyle choice and the possible, if not probable, consequences that flow from these high risk activities are well known.

 Smokers for instance, are aware of the fact that on average they do not live as long as non-smokers pay higher life insurance premiums and that there are a range of health problems associated with this behaviour. Knowing this, some have changed their lifestyles and opted to cease smoking, while others continue to smoke.

It is a well known fact that alcohol is a mind-altering drug. Very few people would dispute the fact that as a consequence of this behaviour (drinking in excess of recommended levels) the individual's demeanour, level of inhibitions and ability to make rational decisions is altered. The extent to which they are altered is to a large degree related to the amount of alcohol consumed.

To argue that external agencies and or governments have a responsibility to provide structures and procedures to control those who have opted for this lifestyle, is to argue that they have the responsibility to not only protect certain individuals from themselves but more importantly, they would be acknowledging that this behaviour is a regular, normal aspect of day to day living, not unlike going to work, driving on public roads and visiting a tourist attraction.

One aspect that is often lost in discussions and debates that follow assaults and other negative incidents that take place in and around licensed premises is that, with rare exceptions, one or more of the individuals involved (based on information obtained after the event) had been drinking excessive amounts of alcohol and that their behaviour was affected by this.

The assumption, that the lifestyle that includes this behaviour is normal and as a consequence governments should put in place a variety of rules, regulations and restrictions needs to not only be challenged but rejected.

There remain many young people who do not drink or if they drink do so in moderation.

What is required is as an in-depth examination of how the lifestyles of those who do not drink and or drink in moderation, differs from those whose lifestyles are the subject of those advocating more rules, regulations and restrictions. And, more importantly what are the contributing factors to the different lifestyles examined?

There is a considerable body of research that has concluded that the socialisation of young persons is the main contributor to a person's behaviour and lifestyle, as they mature.

Unfortunately, while this fact is not denied by many adults (parents), the answer to the question, while blatantly obvious to most, is not easily accepted as it implicates them, and they understandably, would rather place the blame for this behaviour elsewhere, and ask governments to solve the problem.

We do not hesitate to condemn, hold accountable and severely punish those who are responsible for not providing a safe and secure workplace for their employees, or adequate roads to drive on.

We are however, reluctant to blame those responsible for the socialisation of our children when they display unacceptable behaviour, choosing rather to ask the government and its agencies to regulate, control and remediate this.

There is no doubt in my mind, as well as in the minds of many others, that more controls, more police on the streets, altering of hours of alcohol outlets, altering licensing conditions, etc. etc. will have a positive impact on those involved in street violence and unruly behaviour. However, this must be seen for what is, addressing the symptoms and not the underlying causes, and as a consequence those inclined to these lifestyles will seek other avenues and means to continue their

behaviour and society will consequently be required to seek ever more solutions and strategies to address the behaviour that follows.

To illustrate the importance of socialisation and its impact on children one needs only to observe a group of children at play. I recently observed a bus load of young children on what appeared to be a sports day outing at a local reserve. Several teams were formed and some elected to play cricket and others opted for a game of 'footy'. No sooner had the footy teams taken 'the field' than several of the players (boys and girls) commenced shoving and pushing each other and several of the players were observed spitting on the grass. The cricketers observed were seen to be carrying their bats in a fashion that was identical to that practiced by professional cricketers. The point that needs to be made here is these young children (aged between 9 and 11) were demonstrating the influence of older sportsmen and women (role models) which had been instrumental in their socialisation.

 It needs to be stated here that the influence and lifestyles of those who are far closer to them, their parents and siblings provide a far more important and lasting impact on these children.

No doubt many would seek to deny this and or to indicate that they (parents etc) are not in positions to be the socialising influences that would they would like to be if they lived in an 'ideal world', the cold hard facts remain the primary socialising agents of children are their parents.

In the words of Henry David Thoreau, "There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil, to one that is striking at the root". Unless and until we attack the roots of the problem we may well see very little improvement, and as a consequence need to continue to cope with the resulting, physical, social and economic costs associated with this behaviour.

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