

Taking a proactive role on social issues

Last Saturday night I was called to the operating room to help deal with a young man who had been shot through the abdominal aorta. Despite the valiant efforts of three surgeons, a half a dozen nurses, and two anesthesiologists—not to mention the use of 40 units of blood—4 hours later he died. I was never told why he was shot or who shot him. All that I knew was that he was a young man around the age of my children and that he was dead.

This is a pretty commonplace occurrence in Vancouver now. I think in one week we had four shootings in the downtown clubs. Most people assume that it is “gang bangers” or drug dealers killing each other, and, therefore, probably acceptable. But some of the victims are innocent bystanders. One woman was shot through the wall of her home. All of them are someone’s daughter or son.

The situation seems to be getting worse. Property crime is worsening to the point where the police can do virtually nothing about it. In addition,

we have over 1000 homeless people living in the street.

It is just me or does it seem like the quality of life in our city is deteriorating significantly?

Our politicians seem to say anything to get elected but seem unable to deliver as far as remedying the situation once they are elected. Half of the time government seems to be unable to even diagnose the cause of the problem. We know that a lot of homelessness is due to significant mental illness but important programs and even psychiatric hospitals have been cut back. Some of the people in the street are elderly and clearly are not able to cope. The other day it was heartbreaking to see a 20-something woman sleeping outside beside her shopping cart.

There is no question that illicit drugs are a significant problem and are likely at the root of many of these related issues such as property crime, homelessness, and violent crime.

Obviously there is no easy fix. On the one hand having mandatory jail

time for gun infractions, tougher sentences for drug-related crimes, and more police on the street may cut down on some crime. However, a hard look at social issues, such as programs for mental illness, the actual demographics of the homeless in our society, as well as reasonable treatment programs for those suffering from addictions are necessary, and all come with a huge price tag. On the other hand, what is it worth to be able to have no fear about going for a walk in the evening or not worry about your kids going to a show downtown, or avoid having your home or your car broken into on a regular basis and to not have young and old alike sleeping in the mean streets of Vancouver? Perhaps the physicians of British Columbia who come in contact with all of these people and issues need to take a more proactive role in trying to come to grips with these issues.

Maybe this is just the way society is now, but I don’t like it and it sure isn’t the way it used to be.

— AJS