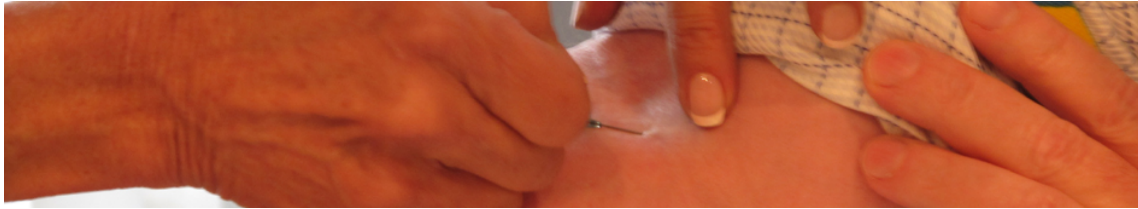


From the Kitchen

7 July 2010



Living in a community is a complex undertaking. It involves a balancing of private and public concerns. There are some issues that are of concern to the community as a whole and some that are purely private.

As a general proposition, parents should be left to get on with the care and upbringing of their children. If they experience difficulties with this, then there is a place for the community to offer support. This was the norm when most people lived in smaller, rural communities than is the case now, when the majority of us in Australia live in a small number of huge and large cities. In the past, if there was illness or injury in a family or a breadwinner was out of work, the neighbours and others would step in and help out in all manner of ways. This might include children staying with relatives or friends for a while, until things at home were sorted out.

In such small communities, there was the possible downside of many people knowing much of your personal business; which was also part of the upside, because people were aware what was going on.

Much of the caring about and intervention in private affairs has now been institutionalised. In theory, this should ensure that everyone who needs help receives it and that such help is of the highest standard. Unfortunately, this is not the reality. Many people receive no help and, among those who do, the help is often inadequate or ineffectual. In the worst cases, the intervention is both unwanted and unnecessary. There is too much heavy-handedness perpetrated by government agencies that have the responsibility and power to intervene.

As a society, we have a responsibility to look after our most vulnerable members. This includes children. However, this looking after should not amount to cossetting children to protect them from all the vicissitudes life has to offer. Dealing with these vicissitudes offers important lessons to children. Protecting them from all of them may be the worst thing we can do. Learning to deal with adversity is an essential lesson for later life. Striking a balance between exposure to such lessons and protection from really bad things is not easy. The aim is to steer children through life in order that they survive, healthy, intact and relatively wise, into adulthood.

I have known people who appeared to have had ideal childhoods – loving, supportive parents, enough money, good schools – who as adults had problems such as alcoholism, depression and/or a tendency to violence. Others, who had grown up in abject poverty, even with uncaring or violent parents, grew up to be well-adjusted adults who were able to form stable relationships and be good parents themselves. There is so much that is not understood about what makes people who (and how) they are.

When it comes to children, it is very difficult to make rules about when they are mature enough to make choices about their lives. They certainly do not have the knowledge, experience and life skills of adults but, when it comes to life-threatening illnesses, children often demonstrate great clarity and wisdom about what they want. They are capable of

understanding the implications of treatment options, if these are explained to them honestly and clearly. The worst thing anyone can do to a child, teen or adult with a life-threatening illness, is to be patronising and withhold information.

Questions of whether to have treatment or not and whether to live or die are very personal and should not be answered by doctors or other professionals – in most instances their whole training has been to keep people alive at any cost. For children too young to understand or to make such choices, the appropriate people to do that for them are parents.

It is my experience that we do not make effective decisions purely on the basis of what we know – the final choice of one side or the other of the fence is made on the basis of intuition and feeling. This is especially the case the more the choices may be life-changing. The more that hangs on the choice, the less the facts are ultimately taken into account. It is this, more than anything else, that makes it wrong for professionals to make such choices for others. The professionals themselves make choices on the basis of intuition and feeling, together with years of gathering data, information, statistics and training, which can skew their ability to choose wisely. They are not the ones who have to live with choices they make for others. They are not the ones who have to make ongoing adjustments as the consequences of those choices unfold.

Every human being on this earth lives his or her life based on a view of the world and of the cosmos. For the majority, such views are based on a shared view of one flavour or another, with some holding views that are non-conforming or even unique. We may have our own opinions about any of those views being right or wrong. However the individual makes his or her choices in life, they are to be respected without judgement by others and, except in the most extreme cases, such choices should not be made for them.