

Education is the best weaponry available

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THE first step in dealing with any problem is to concede there is one. When it comes to the carriage and use of knives we seem to have very recently reached that point, but it has taken far too long.

In 2001 at the first gathering of the Ministerial Crime Prevention Council set up by then police minister Andre Haermeyer, youth worker Les Twentyman and I individually raised the problem of young people carrying knives. In subsequent meetings the council recommended a strategy that included education and enforcement. The latter role was left to the Victoria Police but the council took an active part in the development of a public education campaign, which was short-lived because of limited funding.

Almost three years ago, after a pitched battle between a group of young people wielding knives and machetes, I wrote a piece for this newspaper highlighting the growth of the weapons problem. I ended by stating that the knife problem was getting worse and my final sentence was: "Surely we do not have to wait for more knife casualties - or deaths - before this gets the priority it deserves?" Well, we did get our mayhem and now it seems knives may receive the necessary interest, and action by those with the authority (and the responsibility) to combat the problem.

So what should be the focus? It is the same combination of education and enforcement used so successfully in relation to issues such as seatbelts, drink-driving, speeding and smoking.

Attitudes have shifted and community behaviour has changed in all of those examples.

The education campaign against a knife culture needs to target young people who might be in the next wave of potential weapons carriers, as well as those who currently carry them.

Sadly, it also needs to have an impact on some parents who condone their offspring carrying a knife; ostensibly for self protection, which thankfully is no longer a defence at law.

Such a campaign needs to be professional and sustained. It should contain a plea and a promise. The plea is to never arm yourself - it is not acceptable as a way of life; and the promise is - if you do so you will be detected and punished by the law. For such a promise to be meaningful the consequences at court need to include punishment that provides both an individual and a general deterrent. The available maximum penalties are certainly adequate; the actual sentences being handed down in our courts are another matter.

Many of the offenders detected carrying or using weapons are juveniles. In the past two years just over 36,000 people under 19 have faced courts for offences, including the carriage and use of knives; only 366 (1 per cent) received a custodial sentence.

The police have quite recently adopted "stop and search" tactics in regard to knives but surely they should not have to give written notice in newspapers days before their blitz? Or if they have to keep doing so, I recommend advertisements in multiple locations to make it more difficult for their targets to practise planned avoidance of a single area. They should also look to Britain where amnesties and other successful anti-knife measures are worthy of consideration.

There also needs to be a crackdown on businesses selling banned or heavily controlled weapons. However, the knives most regularly carried are not exotic weapons; they are the types of knives found in any home and it is impossible to deny access to them. Which leads to the final key message - the government, police and courts cannot succeed without us.

All of us as parents, grandparents, role models and citizens have a responsibility to set good examples and inculcate into our young people that they should never carry weapons for any purpose.

It is not a part of our culture and it is not jingoistic to say that it is un-Australian to carry a knife.

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