

People, the ultimate 'medicine'?

By Doug Skeates

Society is fixated on finding cures, cures for diseases, answers for problems, solutions for whatever ills one encounters. Each concern predominates within the human mind as one goes through life searching for what can be done about it. But whatever is attempted it invariably 'too little, too late'. What is really needed is in the long distant past. With the problem so obvious now decision-making is long overdue. Luckily 'The Answer' that lay largely in yesterday still applies today.

An interesting entry in Face-book noted that many problems in life relate more to involvement than to a physical condition. For many the lack of purpose causes folk to drown their sorrows in some form of addiction, often alcohol or drugs. Various studies show that investment in helping people to find a direction in life reduces their need for 'cures' in a chemical sense. Obviously this isn't an 'either/or' situation as much as 'both/and'. Human beings are highly complex and no one cure is a silver bullet but solutions to many problems could benefit from a major change in life's social condition.

A recent concern in news media is loneliness, with many people feeling the lack of human involvement in their lives. With the increase in social communication there appears a real loss of face to face involvement.

Texting does not take its place adequately and there is an ever increasing dependence on mechanical contact. Certainly the cheapest form of spreading the message is a recording whereby a company can avoid the cost of employing people to answer the phone. In fact every effort is made to eliminate human involvement despite the fact that a high proportion of communication is based on body language. One of my favorite examples has been the word 'yes'. Written it infers agreement but when spoken, inflection becomes important to the message one wishes to impart whether in a form of emphasis or doubt. The real intent is only apparent in person to person conversation.

Various studies have shown the effectiveness of community in promoting well-being. Susan Pinker's book, *The Village Effect* (2014), the science of friendship, has been described before. In isolated villages in Italy life-spans far exceed averages of those in more developed parts of the world. Living beyond the 100 year mark is the norm. Beyond factors such as regular exercise, diet and a positive attitude, which are commonly recommended, the primary element is regular contact with friends and relatives. The key feature is meaningful visitation whereby older people have almost daily communication with those closest to them. Loneliness should never be a factor in life.

An article in *The Guardian* was a personal account by a son when conducting a eulogy at his father's funeral. He was surprised at the crowded attendance including many beyond the normal family. His father had lived alone for many years. The writer assumed that his dad didn't see many people but it turned out that the older gentlemen had regular conversations with neighbours at a local café, knew all the local bus drivers whom he greeted regularly, in addition to a large number of old friends and their children with whom he'd remained in close contact. They turned up at his funeral en masse.

What the writer had overlooked was the extent to which his father had really enjoyed life and the people in it. This was the essence in Pinker's book, not only the daily contact with people but the enjoyment both really appreciated about their times together. Enjoying people was the best medicine that his father experienced.

A recent news item pertained to doctors prescribing social interaction as a cure for many ills in life.

A close member of our family, age 93, is having the time of his life with activities in a senior's club. Though his wife died a few years ago he has developed a new life for himself, going to dances, luncheons and games. He has taken up photography and much of his time is taken up taking pictures of the many facets of his life and sharing them via Facebook. Even the medical profession recognizes that there are more than pharmaceutical solutions for curing people's ills.