



Reward before effort?

Is the cart before the horse?

Craig Hassed, MBBS, FRACGP, is Senior Lecturer, Department of General Practice, Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria.

I was recently given pause to consider an issue which, I suspect, is an extremely important one for us as individuals as well as for the community and the health care system. It has to do with seeking rewards without the prerequisite effort. In many walks of life this approach not only makes those rewards less deserved, it also seems to make them impossible to achieve.

The stimulus for considering the issue was an interesting conference held in Melbourne through the collaboration of the World Federation of Therapeutic Communities and the Windana Centre. Therapeutic communities take a holistic approach to drug rehabilitation and a different direction to purely harm minimisation strategies.

The therapeutic communities' approach utilises a wide variety of strategies. There are live-in programs that focus on education, life skills, anger management, and communication skills as well as helping with practicalities such as accommodation, health assessment and finances. However, it was the programs that build in challenging activities such as venturing into the wilderness that seem to yield the most success.

It seemed the challenging activities were transformational experiences for many participants as they were almost compelled by circumstances to draw on resources they may not have known they had. The role of trust and mutual support in such situations is crucial in repairing damaged lives and relationships.

Success rates for those who complete these programs are very high¹⁻³ and the long term outcomes are excellent especially if strategies are reinforced and attention is given to the social context to which the person returns.

During the conference there were many inspiring stories heard from participants having had major breakthroughs and consequently living drug free and productive lives. The message was clear - the rewards are there for those who are prepared to commit the necessary effort and energy, even in the often desperate area of drug rehabilitation. This was true for all those involved - the program coordinators, the carers and especially the patients themselves.

If there are justifiable rewards achievable for those prepared to put in the necessary work, then what of those individuals, groups or communities who seek to attain the rewards without expending the effort.

At the conference one of the keynote speakers suggested that many people who find themselves with a drug habit do so because they are looking to find an easy path to happiness, or to becoming free from the pain of anxiety, depression, disillusionment and fear.

Indeed, when we reflect on our own experience we tend to find that many easy paths take us in the exact opposite direction of what we seek and many difficult paths, though unappealing, are more worthwhile in the long run. Such a concept is conveyed in allegorical form in

many great literary works. For example in *Pilgrim's Progress* where the pilgrims take the pleasant but wrong turn at 'By-path Meadow' which leads them to a meeting with the gruesome 'Giant Despair'.

Is what we see in drug abuse really only another expression of a community wide phenomenon of looking for rewards by easy but inappropriate means? Are we looking for the fruits of labour such as happiness, justice, wealth, health without the necessary labour?

For example, in terms of constructive social change it tends to take place after enormous effort, courage and sacrifice. The autobiography of Nelson Mandela and the apartheid struggle is a testament to overcoming many internal and external barriers.

Prison and the authorities conspire to rob each man of his dignity. In and of itself, that assured that I would survive, for any man or institution that tries to rob me of my dignity will lose because I will not part with it at any price or under any pressure ... I am fundamentally an optimist. ... Part of being optimistic is keeping one's head pointed towards the sun, one's feet moving forward. There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lay defeat and death.⁵

Nelson Mandela

Economically, does the attempt to reap financial rewards which have not been earned cause ourselves, our community and perhaps even other countries many problems in the longer term? Is this a denial of a fundamental natural principle? Wealth without work was the first of the 'seven deadly sins' (Table 1) referred to by Steven Covey in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that wealth should only be derived from ingenuity and work, so if we are deriving wealth without labour then it might mean it has to come from someone else's labour. History tells us such injustices lead to resentment and even rebellion if severe enough.

In the health field there are some who surmise we are becoming a society overly reliant on pharmaceuticals to cure every ill. Are we often trying to maintain health without sufficient effort to cultivate good mental health, self discipline and healthy lifestyle change? Does this create a far more expensive, interventionist and relatively ineffectual health care system?

If it is a law of nature to reap rewards only after the labour has been done then, paradoxically it seems, it is also an aspect of human nature that we seek the easy way to do things. We all recognise the desire to minimise labour. Indeed, this desire has led to many ingenious inventions and discoveries. But perhaps there is a fundamental and important distinction between working with the laws of nature in order to save labour and ignoring the laws of nature.

If one considers most of the wisdom traditions of east and west, one would find that freedom, peace and happiness are only found after great effort and discipline. Consider the 'rugged ascent' out of Plato's cave or the constant striving for self mastery of a Buddhist monk.

Often the goals we value most, such as character, happiness, peace, justice, equity, morality and health are hardest to attain, and can only be found after much soul searching and sacrifice. It is only through effort that worthwhile rewards can be achieved.

Table 1. The seven deadly sins

1. Wealth without work
2. Pleasure without conscience
3. Knowledge without character
4. Commerce without morality (ethics)
5. Science without humanity
6. Religion without sacrifice
7. Politics without principle

References

1. Simpson D D, Joe G W, Bracy S A. Six year follow up of opioid addicts after admission to treatment. *Arch Gen Psychiatry* 1982; 39(11):1318-1323.
2. Hawke J M, Jainchill N, De Leon G. Adolescent amphetamine users in treatment: client profiles and treatment outcomes. *J Psychoactive Drugs* 2000; 32(1):95-105.
3. Messina N P, Wish E D, Nemes S. Therapeutic community treatment for substance abusers with antisocial personality disorder. *J Subst Abuse Treat* 1999; 17(1-2):121-128.
5. Mandela N. *The long walk to freedom*. London: Abacus, 1995.

AFP