

Sterilising junkies may seem harsh, but it does make sense

By Ian O'Doherty

Friday February 18 2011

So, there I am, sitting in a cab on the quays when trouble breaks out between a bunch of junkies on the pavement across the road. Nothing unusual there, of course.

After all, anyone who spends any time in Dublin's city centre will see these feral, worthless scumbags getting up to mischief all the time -- but this bit of aggro was different.

Because one of the women -- if you can even call these people that -- who was kicking a bloke on the ground was also holding her baby in her arms as she was delivering the beating.

It was quite remarkable, really, to see in modern Ireland, in the full light of day and in front of shocked and appalled passers by, a mother holding her kid while being part of a group belting the crap out of someone.

Let's get a few things straight -- I hate junkies more than anything else.

I hate their greed, their stupidity, their constant sense of self pity, they way they can justify their behaviour, the damage they do to their own family and to others. If every junkie in this country were to die tomorrow I would cheer.

That might seem a little on the harsh side but anyone who has ever seen a family member become a junkie will understand exactly where I am coming from.

And, also, there is a distinction between an addict and a junkie.

An addict is someone who has developed a habit that they're trying to shake. A junkie, on the other hand, is the one who breaks into his own brother's house and steals stuff; a junkie is the one who will rob you blind and sell valuables that you have worked and saved for and then sell it for a tenner bag of smack. They are worthless.

So I was interested to see the initiative by Dublin doctor and addiction expert Dr Patrick Troy who wants to offer junkies €220 to be sterilised. It might seem harsh at first, but when you think about it the scheme makes perfect sense.

As Troy himself puts it: "It is not a moral issue because drug users can already get long-term contraception free of charge. It is an economic issue and the savings to the State would be huge";

And indeed they would -- you only have to look at vast swathes of inner city Dublin as well as disgracefully underdeveloped and under-resourced areas outlying the city where addicts and junkies outnumber people who have jobs.

A sense of helpless despair has set in for many of them, even though they are being cossetted by charity campaigners who tell them that nothing is their fault and they don't have to take personal responsibility for their actions.

And while free long-term contraception is obviously a good idea, the simple fact is that the only appointment most of them are able to efficiently keep is with their dealer, so expecting them to turn up at a clinic or doctor's surgery on a regular basis is simply naïve.

Predictably, Fr Peter McVerry has come out and condemned the idea, saying: 'I think the idea of paying people to have long-term contraception and sterilisation is appalling. Often if you are a drug user then you will do anything to get money. If you hear about this scheme then you might sign up for it without thinking. It is a step too far'

Typically, he doesn't say what the appropriate steps would be, other than to give them lots of hugs and cuddles and tell them they're great and nothing they do is their fault.

It's interesting, however, that he says: Often they will do anything to get money

Yes, priest, we know. Because too many of us have been the victim of some junkie at one point or another -- we've been burgled, we've been mugged or we've had our car broken into and the contents ransacked.

It's an appalling abuse of privacy and property and there are people in entire estates who are terrified to leave their house or flat because of gangs of these people looking for an easy score.

I did a radio debate with McVerry a few years back and it was a thoroughly bizarre experience.

He peddled the notion that the phrase 'junkie' was a pejorative term of abuse that was offensive to drug users.

I knew the man had some far-out views on society but the idea that your average drug user was going to start writing letters to the Indo and ringing Liveline to complain that they felt they had been abused by someone calling them a junkie was completely hilarious.

And, as is often the case, there was more sympathy for them than for the victims of their crimes.

But what's often lost in the haze of argument is that the biggest victims of these vermin are the kids themselves.

What chance does a child have if it has to spend the formative years of its life watching their mother and/or father nodding off with a needle in their arm?

What chance does a child have if the best meal it can look forward to is a packet of crisps that it finds in the cupboard because Ma and Da have spent their dole and the children's allowance on smack?

I'm not exactly one of those will-someone-please-think-about-the-kiddies types, but my heart, hard as it is, went out to that poor kid being held in his scumbag mother's arms as she administered a beating.

What sort of future does it have? The answer, sadly, is none.

And that's why it is important to give credence to initiatives thought up by creative men like Dr Troy.

Ian O'Doherty iodoherty@independent.ie