

Dissatisfaction guaranteed

By Ruth Ostrow

I HEARD a story the other day that really gave me pause for reflection. I had rung Diane Summer, a well-respected Queensland-based doctor, author and therapist, to discuss a column I was thinking of writing when she started talking about professional indemnity and the implications the issue was having on her medical friends.

"So many of us are thinking of leaving the medical profession. We are feeling so depressed, so undervalued, and it is having an enormous impact on our desire to keep going as doctors and therapists," she told me, explaining that she is moving towards working as an artist in a bid to express a more nourishing part of herself.

"Those of us in the caring professions are trying our best. But there's a sense now that doing your best is no longer enough. People are dissatisfied and feel they have grounds for suing. I'm not talking about cases of real negligence but things do go wrong because we are human.

"And in this new culture of blame where people are taking less responsibility for their own lives and health, it's becoming difficult to work."

Summer cited statistics that show Australia to be one of the most litigious countries, per capita, in the world, after the US. "In this society we are conditioned to expect perfection. We are not taught to accept any form of suffering or any normal defects in ourselves, our lives, our children, and thus we look for someone to blame."

The Dalai Lama certainly agrees, recently expressing his view that society can't legislate ethics. That in the West we need to find balance and inner peace around the whole complex issue of personal responsibility.

And it's true. Since the recent case where a man sued Waverley Council in Sydney because he hit a sandbar at Bondi beach, there has been a sense of things going too far. Life becomes farcical when burglars can sue home owners because they hurt themselves during a break-and-enter. In this world we are creating, doctors are fearful of delivering babies, councils no longer want to create children's playgrounds or to police our beaches, and hosts fear guests will sue them. A friend who is a voluntary health carer for dying people told me recently that if insurance premiums rose too steeply, in order to cover all the negligence claims around the country, the service he worked for could not keep going.

According to Summer we are heading the way of the US and the reason is that people don't take responsibility for what's happening in their own lives.

"I've noticed that my patients are increasingly dissatisfied with their lives in general, their relationships and sexuality. They feel spiritually empty," she says. "Largely because we are all being increasingly conditioned by mass advertising and a consumer culture that offers quick-fix tablets for everything - obesity, depression, insomnia - or products to buy, drink or wear that are supposed to make us happy but which ultimately fail."

Then, when things don't work out, people get angry and say it is someone else's fault. "One woman in the US is trying to sue fast-food companies for her own obesity. I heard another woman sued her doctor because she got sick after she cancelled the appointment."

Summer, who is author of *Voyage of Love & Sex* (Oracle Press), says we are living in a dependent culture. An adolescent culture. In psychological terms, we have a parent-child relationship with authority. This is making us regressive rather than progressive in our own healing process.

Ironically, most people are very disillusioned with our authority figures, yet many of us still want to be rescued, cured, offered happy-ever-after. In the absence of personal responsibility people become fractious, dependent children rather than adults.

I agree with Summer that the gross materialism of our culture is a negative influence on our collective state of mind. We're all under such pressure to achieve and consume, working long hours, always comparing ourselves. There's little sense of being at ease. Small things distress us. Everything becomes about performance, even our sex lives. We are estranged from God, from ourselves and from simple pleasures like smelling, tasting, touching.

Summer and I both lament what living in concrete boxes in cities does to the soul. "We've lost the soothing that comes from living in nature, smelling the sea, and the roses, having natural light from an open sky," she says. "There's loss of connection with the emotional, spiritual and sensual world."

Which is what her art is about. "I draw moments of simple pleasure - the wind in the hair, dancing, tasting, living in the moment - to remind people about the joy of being alive." Her solution is simple but sweet. "Only when we locate our deepest inner source of happiness can we stop blaming others for our misery or for life's normal misfortunes."

It's a lesson in personal responsibility that we, as a society, should heed before our beaches and playgrounds close down, and our valued, professional carers take their toys and go home.

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