

EDITORIAL

DRUGS AND ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR.

A heading in one of the recent East African dailies prompted me to write this editorial. The heading "Unrest in Schools Blamed on Drugs" sent my mind racing back in time to the early 1960s when it was fashionable to dismiss young people opposed to the American involvement in Vietnam war as social miscreants who used drugs 24 hours a day. It did not matter that many of these young people were able to defend their anti-war stance eloquently with a clarity of mind which their accusers could only envy. As an undergraduate, I found the whole fiasco funny and occasionally joined in the demonstration just to unwind after a boring lecture. As an African from a newly independent country, I was least concerned with the convoluted arguments for or against the Vietnam War. The rest of course is history.

Since my undergraduate days in the 1960s I have witnessed or read about many other occasions where deviant behavior was blamed on drug abuse. Soccer fans cheering their teams often get carried away and those who seek simplistic answers to human behaviour often stick a label of drug abuse on such fans. Others stop short of blaming religious (read Islamic) fanaticism on drug abuse because the label will not stick. During elections, politicians hire goons to heckle and disrupt meetings of their opponents and it is often assumed that such people are given drugs for maximum effect. In reality, many of them do not take drugs. Street children in many cities sniff glue and occasionally use psychotropic drugs. I once had an opportunity to discuss the problem of street children with a colleague, a deceased professor of anatomy in the University of Nairobi. To him the drugs were not the problem but rather the solution to the street children's problems. In support of his argument, he explained how these children live under a harsh environment, scavenging through garbage for food, sleeping on pavements at night, being ridiculed as pests by the general public. Under those prohibitively harsh conditions, it is impossible to retain a modicum of sanity unless they take drugs. Perhaps we could borrow the professor's prism to look at other situations. What of the married couples who drink excessively because their marriage is on the rocks? Clearly their behaviour is a consequence and not cause of the marital problems. And what of mortuary attendants who drink excessively to retain a semblance of sanity in a macabre environment? And then there is the scenario of peasant farmers using vulgar language and even becoming violent while demanding to be paid delayed dues for farm products delivered to the co-operative societies.

In today's turbulent world, one would be well advised to think twice before associating deviant behaviour with drug abuse in absence of compelling evidence. In East Africa, students' unrest in secondary schools and universities often defy rationality and that is why we raise the bogey of drug abuse. What is often not acknowledged is the fact that in nearly all cases of student unrest, there were legitimate complaints, which were brought to the attention of relevant authority but were dismissed as frivolous. In assessing the gravity and significance of these complaints, the relevant authority applies value judgement at variance or totally different from that of affected students. The students are accused of making mountains out of molehills and there is a tendency to underestimate the impact of "herd mentality" phenomenon. To those whose mind is stuck in the past, $8+8=16$. Period. Not so, say modern mathematicians, it is only true if our point of reference is base 10. Obviously too confusing for many of us! Must we always invoke the bogey of drug abuse to explain deviant protest behaviour in young people, regardless of the circumstances?

The tendency to associate antisocial behaviour with drugs is partly historical. It goes back to the biblical times when Noah was found drunk and naked by his two sons, Shem and Japheth (Genesis 9:20-23). In more recent times there are reliable statistics to show that drug abuse can lead to crime and antisocial behaviour. A Brazilian Magazine *VEJA*, had on its cover the heading "Young people and Drugs – Did they have to die?" The magazine shows photographs of normal-looking youths who had died - victims of drug abuse. Drug abuse is a big problem in such countries as USA, Britain, Europe and Japan. The exception is the Islamic countries. It is in recognition of this fact that the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan said "Drugs are tearing apart our societies, spawning crime, spreading diseases such as AIDS and killing our youth and our future." The World Health Organization lists

five reasons why young people might be drawn to drugs. These are; 1) they want to feel grown-up and make their own decisions; 2) they want to fit in ;3) they want to relax and feel good; 4) they want to take risk and rebel; 5) they want to satisfy their curiosity.

While the dangers of drug abuse worldwide is supported by incontrovertible data, we should guard against the possibility of taking a short-cut in explaining all deviant behaviour in young people by invoking the bogey of drug abuse.

Editorial-in-Chief