Drink-slur town hits back

by: Peter Roberts

An expert on the dangers of alcohol misuse who claimed alcohol abuse was rampant among eight and nine-year-olds in the Tregaron area made a dramatic climbdown during a seminar at the town's secondary school.

Mr. Peter Coviello, director of Dyfed Council on Alcoholism, had also contended in a Press release to publicise the seminar, that a large number of teenagers and school-leavers in the area were heavily involved with alcohol abuse and were "consistently drunk."

But during the seminar he said, "I apologise if feelings locally have been offended—certainly it was not my intention. I can't see anything wrong with the Press release other than this sentence which was indiscrетe and for that I apologise."

"This particular problem is not in any way unique to Tregaron," added Mr. Coviello.

But the ten local people at the seminar outnumbered by the number of BBC personnel covering the event, were dissatisfied with Mr. Coviello's apology and especially his failure to quote statistics or give any idea about under-age drinking in the locality.

He was only able to disclose that a questionnaire filled in by sixty 14-16 year-olds at an unnamed Llanelli school reveals 99% had drunk alcohol, more than 90% had had a drink within the previous four weeks and 35% had had a drink during the previous week.

Some 6% had been drunk on at least one occasion during the previous month. A similar survey in a Pembrokeshire school indicated 30-40% of those questioned had been drunk that particular week and over 20% had sought help for their drink problem.

Mr. Coviello, a Catholic who admitted he got drunk when he was 16 because he was serving Mass, said there was a major problem of alcohol misuse in West Wales in general and he complained of a sense of social deprivation among the young.

"There is a sense of a lost society. I never thought for one moment when I left school that I would not get a job. Now many of them, children are at the age of 15, 16 and younger feel they do not know what life is all about and what they are going to do in the next few years.

"That produces a sensation of hopelessness and fear and when those sensations occur they look for artificial supports. Those supports are often the use of alcohol and drugs," he said.

Mr. Coviello was strongly criticised for his outburst on Tregaron's teeny tipplers by the chairman of the community council, Mr. John Fish, who accused him of 'slating' local young people "without mercy" as though the area was a den of iniquity.

There is far more goodness here than evil and I am not saying that we have not got a problem with under-age drinking. But whilst looking for and condemning the evil let us also look for and praise the good.

"I am not whitewashing Tregaron. We have got a problem with under-age drinking but it is not only in Tregaron... it's every other village and town in Wales. Why pick on Tregaron?" said Mr. Fish.

The seminar was chaired by the Bishop of St. Davids, the Rt. Rev. George Noakes, who said in his introduction, "We are coming to Tregaron today, not because Tregaron is worse than any other place."

"But there was a time when we felt the little villages were immune to the social problems of alcohol and drug misuse. But unfortunately even the little villages are affected now. It is a social problem that has now become a disease," added the Bishop.

He recounted hearing on his car radio recently that 75% of under-14s in South Wales knew where to buy drugs. "How true that is I don't know, you can manipulate statistics as you like, but it shows us that the writing is on the wall."

"The funny thing is that when you talk to people they say it does not affect them. You have all heard them saying they know what they are doing and they know when to stop. But you all know that the innocent puff can lead to the needle", he said.

Mr. Coviello presented a list of four Cardinal don'ts: don't blame the young people for the situation they find themselves in, don't panic or over-react, don't exaggerate and don't try to do anything about it on your own.

He added three recommendations which would help tackle the problem: concerted effort, accept that progress would be slow and seek information about the difficulties.

"We must not stick our heads in the sand and ignore the problem. If we demonstrate that it is not necessary to use alcohol excessively to enjoy life, I think young people will follow the example," added Mr. Coviello.

Dyfed's advisory teacher for drug abuse Weny-