

WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY – PASS THE BADGE

Since the spring of 2020, I have received (and sent) countless emails starting “I hope you are well”. Those emails, those opening expressions of humanity and care, have replaced the incidental interactions that would usually allow me to see and hear for myself whether someone is well. Those opportunities came in many forms but included frequent face-to-face training workshops, and lunchtime talks on law, practice, and life. They also included talking about work, family, or trivia in the Hall, corridors, or rooms of Parliament House, or while walking along the High Street, or over coffee, lunch, or a drink. Those necessary, taken-for-granted, and incidental benefits have been replaced by hours of solitary work punctuated by email notification, phone calls, and avatars trapped in Zoom’s rectangles.

The changed working habits have exacerbated pre-existing problems and caused new ones. Advocates have always worked under pressure, with the resulting stresses, anxiety, and coping mechanisms. Lockdown has intensified those pressures and consequences, and exacerbated concerns that include too much or too little work, and strained financial liquidity. Isolation, adaptation to new working practices, and uncertainty have been added to the febrile mix.

These comments might well be met with a shrug of indifference or schadenfreude. “Why is he talking about financial liquidity? You don’t meet many poor lawyers.” “They don’t look too vulnerable to me, parading around in their wigs and gowns, shouting at witnesses.” “Lawyers have had it too easy for too long. Welcome to the real world.”

These are powerful stereotypes. Behind the professional mask, the eighteenth century clothes, however, are people of all shapes and sizes, colours, creeds, states of health, and backgrounds. Real people struggling with the curse of the strong, perfectionism, unrealistic expectations, and the travails described above. Real people who work hard for their clients because they care about the administration of justice, their profession, and perhaps most of all their clients. Real people who I think are well described by words President Theodore Roosevelt used in a talk about citizenship given to the Sorbonne, Paris in 1910:

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there

is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

The Faculty of Advocates aims to look after all its men and women in the arena. On Monday 5th October 2020 a new cohort of “devils”, fourteen able lawyers hoping to become Advocates, start a 9-month blended training programme. Their health and wellbeing is foremost in our minds. Not only do they learn about threats to wellbeing and what they might do about them, but the Faculty has a mentorship programme to top up its informal collegiality. A small army of Advocates volunteers to train and mentor the devils. Pastoral care is every bit as important as the imparting of knowledge and knowhow. The mentorship programme continues into practice. For the practising Advocates, face-to-face training has been replaced by remote workshops, talks, and coaching; no doubt those measures will be developed as technology and technological capability allow.

Remote learning, remote meetings, and remote court hearings are no substitute for face-to-face interaction, with all its incidental benefits. World Mental Health Day is an excellent opportunity to reflect on how we might try to look after ourselves and each other in the present circumstances. Until we meet again, remote measures will have to do. I hope you are well.