

Adolescents; at what age?

Barbara Bradshaw,
Law Society Chief Executive Officer
bbradshaw@lawsocnt.asn.au



I am writing my column in anticipation of the Law Week focus on youth issues.

In this I am minded not only on the specific issues of youth who have interactions with the Court, but some of the other youth issues confronting the Northern Territory. Youth has a wide definition rising from young children, some in need of care, to adolescents.

In regard to “adolescents” I am minded of the “expert” on the television this morning who suggested that this interesting stage in development went from puberty, which could be as young as 10 years, to 24.

On a serious note, the Society is, through the Family Law Committee in particular, developing a submission to the current Inquiry on Child Protection. This will focus on the role of lawyers and the Courts system in the process, noting that they do not have the whole answer but are appropriate in certain circumstances. The practitioners working in this area have a very difficult job and their level of commitment is impressive.

Various other practitioners such as legal aid lawyers with organisations such as NTLAC, CAALAS and NAAJA and prosecutors work in youth justice where the issues faced are considerable.

From reading the news there are problems in the area all over Australia and indeed the world

“... this interesting stage in development went from puberty, which could be as young as 10 years, to 24.”

but again we have some unique challenges in the Northern Territory. We envisage that the speaker at the Law Week dinner in Alice Springs and lunch in Darwin will cover some of the issues in juvenile justice.

Law Week will look at other youth issues as well. Legal issues facing youth go beyond the issues involved in youth justice and the criminal law. One issue is mobile phones and many teenagers get “burnt” through their agreement to mobile phone contracts. There will be a law week forum on that issue (which many “oldies” might also find useful).

One issue for the Territory is recruitment and retention of young lawyers and other professionals. Many young people chose to make use of the wonderful employment opportunities, and chance of training, present in the Territory.

However, many adolescents, children of locals or people who came to the Territory through work opportunities and a sense of “adventure”, and who went through the local school system, are now choosing to study interstate and one wonders whether they will return to live in the Territory in the short or long term.

Territory legal practices, legal aid agencies and government need to be able to not only recruit clever young lawyers but also to retain them, noting in particular the opportunities available for not only advancement but to carry out interesting work of the sort they might not get in a large law firm. There, young lawyers will have an important place in the Territory of the future. Housing affordability and other factors should not prevent them from remaining here. }

“There, young lawyers will have an important place in the Territory of the future. Housing affordability and other factors should not prevent them from remaining here.”