

Dr Roger Allen

## Depression, pessimism and modern life

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*As a chest and sleep physician Dr Roger Allen sees patients with insomnia, anxiety, depression and stress every day. These problems underlie many of the organic illnesses he treats. Here is the second part of his exploration of the social and spiritual life of Brisbane today.*

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Symptoms such as shortness of breath and cough are increasingly common and are often due to unresolved psychic stress. The reasons for these common afflictions are complex and I fear the societal malady causing this may be incurable. The species may be heading for doomsday unless each of us participates in some radical surgery, each according to personal capacity and vision. Time is against us.

As the dominant species currently on this limited biosphere, *Homo sapiens* faces a dilemma of his own making. His very success as a species has led to his own crowded nest being soiled by his own droppings. The planet we call Earth is groaning under the weight of human biomass.

Modern men and women compete like rats to live in modern cities like Brisbane. Sydney is even worse. As occurs with laboratory rats under stress, fertility has dropped and an increasing number are opting not to have children. As society becomes more complex and disintegrates, a growing number are suffering from a wide range of mental illness and in particular, depression.

The number of bars on our windows and the growth of para-police forces in Brisbane attests to the declining security of our lives. I remember as a child in Brisbane when we left for the local shop with doors and windows open. Now our children are supervised even when playing in the front yard. Gone are the days when parents let their children walk to and from school or let them play all day like I did at Kalinga Park on weekends or in my billycart around neighbouring suburbs. Our homes are prisons and Brisbane's children grow obese from being chauffeured everywhere.

The mechanism underlying depression we are told is due to an imbalance or deficiency of neurotransmitters such as serotonin and noradrenaline which are an integral part of the brain's wiring. This understanding of the biochemical upset of the brain has led to huge advances in the production of anti-depressants now among the commonest drugs prescribed in the western world. What, however, underlies this epidemic of depression in cities like Brisbane throughout the western world?

Our whole culture and economy is firstly grounded on growth; growth of almost everything except cane toads and fire ants. The stock market graph never goes down for long. Our politicians are obsessed with this and regard it as a litmus paper test of the success or failure of political policy. But limitless growth in any system is ultimately untenable. We are running out of stuff to exploit. We are burning the floorboards of our own house to keep warm. The whole scenario is ultimately unsustainable as it functions on a false set of assumptions.

The outcome is consumerism, borrowing often beyond the means of the individual, and the endless encroachment on the environment by urban and industrial sprawl. The environment and eco systems pays the bill, be it Moreton Bay or the local creek where a supermarket is planned. Local townships like Maleny are like defenceless villages against companies wanting to impose “advances” like big supermarkets at the expense of the local ambience or a creek’s platypuses. Australians take it as a God-given right to fish our rivers, estuaries and seas as if of infinite abundance for man to take. Fish and crabs are “free”. “We fish and we vote” says the slogan on gas-guzzling four-wheel drives draped with fishing rods. This freedom has become a symbol of the modern Australian “good-life” but at what cost?

Biodiversity has diminished even in my lifetime. There are more suburbs with names ending in “Lakes”, ‘Waters’ or ‘Downs’ as farm land and bush disappears beneath them. Housing costs increase as urban density increases and public transport fails to keep up, and there is an increased reliance on an extended food supply as local market gardens, the home vegetable patch and hen house disappear. The nutritional value of food quality has declined as farmers increasingly use hybrid crops to maintain productivity and maximise profits, mostly for the middle man. We have bigger strawberries but with no taste and equally tasteless tomatoes designed to bounce to save bruising in transit.

The mind of modern *Homo sapiens* has undergone change too. Scientific knowledge of the universe has destroyed simple notions of God and faith. We are told that we face the possible destruction of the planet by nuclear weapons, star-wars and biological and chemical arsenals. This adds to societal helplessness, anxiety and depression. Even my young children talk about threats from rogue asteroids. An increasing number of our children suffer from depression and youth suicide. Alcohol and drug abuse are modern malaise that beset most families sooner or later.

And what about the latest – “Global Terrorism” and the “War on Terror” - to add to one’s sense of insecurity? We are bombarded with news day and night, unusually in glib pre-digested packages measured in seconds lest we think too much or question the propaganda. News sources are subject to less and less diversity as the number of media moguls diminishes and media empires are now larger than some national economies. The bottom line is the dollar, not high quality newsgathering. The media has replaced religion as the opiate of the people.

The once indisputable role of the Church has vanished. Gone is the inevitability and order of life after death. Our hope is in science. Concepts of salvation are less

fashionable. Disappearing is the local parish and church - once a place though which couples might meet. This now occurs through friends, night clubs, the Internet or increasingly, not at all. The number of single people living alone is increasing. City life is increasingly in depersonalised apartments, immune from contact with the person next door. Anguish and loneliness go unnoticed.

The village meeting place and market is disappearing. Local shopping centres are no longer markets or meeting places but huge sprawling conglomerates called shopping towns, covering hectares of concrete with parking for thousands of cars. Most shoppers come and go in total anonymity.

Job insecurity, “rationalisation” “down-sizing”, “retrenchment” and “severance packages” are new words we all know and most have experienced. Endangered are concepts such as dedication to a single stable career or a life-long employer or, even to the Public Service. Population mobility and the nuclear family have discouraged long-term friendships and family break down.

Psychotherapy will not fix these issues whose roots are societal and spiritual as well as ultimately, biochemical. Psychiatrists rarely delve into an individual's spiritual vacuum. After all, the doctor is him/herself in the same boat. Hence the high rate of suicide in the medical profession. Few cultures over the past millennia have been so deficient in a belief system or a vision of the future. We are losing our cohesion; the glue that sticks us together both as individuals and as groups. We are “out of sync” with the environment not to mention our inner selves and one another. We have lost our “mojo”.

New paradigms are needed at all levels of society; political, institutional and personal. Our leaders can no longer enjoy the music at the stern of the sinking Titanic. There are icy waters below. Visionary and courageous leadership has the capacity to uplift us. Hope and a willingness to confront difficult issues can result. Change can occur. However visionary leadership and political integrity is in short supply. We need more Nelson Mandelas; more men and women of vision as well as political parties who are not afraid to lead from in front rather than govern from behind by opinion poll. I am pessimistic about our increasingly lamentable city. I sincerely hope for the sake of my young children that this local and global malady is still retrievable. The solutions are many but time is running out as our fragile biosphere degrades.

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Dr Roger Allen is a Consultant Respiratory and Sleep Physician who was formerly a Clinical Associate Professor with the University of Queensland Medical School. He has deep roots with Brisbane dating to forbears who came to the Moreton Bay Colony in 1849 on the sailing ship, Fortitude.