I spend most of my working life, and a lot of what I like to call my free time, dealing with or talking about matters to do with drugs. Perhaps before I go any further I ought to explain what I mean by the word 'drugs'. I mean what everyone in the country who hasn't done a course on the subject

means by the word. I mean the illegal drugs that get sold to our youngsters in the street, in the youth club, at the disco, outside the shops, in the town centre, and anywhere else they gather. I don't mean tea, coffee, alcohol or even tobacco. I know of all the arguments that show they are all drugs ad nauseam, and I agree with them, but if we are to understand and begin to deal with the subject

from the perspective of young people then all that is just a hindrance, so drugs

means drugs — OK!

I have been connected with this subject, and more particularly the education side of the drugs into particularly the concentration of the target issue, since the long-gone days of 'shock-hor-ror', when we rather innocently thought that if we showed them films (it wasn't even videos then) full of dead junkies and arms covered in sores, then we would put them off for life. Not surprisingly it didn't work for very many, and the problem continued. So we cast shock-horror aside and went for the information model ("give 'em the facts and they'll make the right decisions," we said). Well, we may have improved their knowledge, but we didn't help them to make good and rational decisions, and so they carried on making their choices without using the knowledge we had given them. The next model was all self-esteem and decision-making

lost the subject among decisions about li styles, relationships, sex, sexuality, AIDS, and all the other things that youngsters have to decide about. And still the problem of drugs grows

I think that the time has come for a rethink. I

IT'S NOT OUR

PROBLEM ANY

MORE

By David Emmett

REM

think it is time that we recognised that this is not our problem any more. The problem of drugs now belongs to the youngsters. It is not our problem because most of us are too old — we're past it. I certainly am. No one is going to come up to me in a pub or a club and offer me drugs. And, let's face it, I wouldn't be seen dead at a rave. It would be easy for me, I could arrest them, but it isn't going to happen: I'm not a

member of the consumer generation any more, and nor are most of you. It's the youngsters who have the problem now, not us. I think we gave the problem to them. We received it from our parents at an insignificant level and then allowed it to grow around us. Perhaps we didn't know what to do, or we didn't care enough, or perhaps because of airy-fairy ideas about life and liberty we just let it creep up on us, and now we've given it to them.

I think that has to be stated clearly and without equivocation. It is up to young people what happens to the drug scene from now on. We are not in control of it. They are.

As well as having the problem, I believe that youngsters have the solution as well. What they have (something that you and I have very little of) is influence over young people. I learned a long time ago that the influence of people like

pales into insignificance when compared with the influence of the youngsters up the street. If an adult says "Don't do that" it's only an invitaan adult says bor to that it is only aim what-tion to do it all the more. We recognise that, and indeed it was no different when we were young. But if a member of a youngster's peer scene says it, then that is powerful indeed. We are all subject to peer pressure, perhaps youngsters more so than any other section of society. That places in their hands a very powerful weapon indeed, a weapon that can change the world. A weapon called influence.

The trouble with influence is that we have got into the habit of thinking of it only in negative terms. We talk about him or her being a bad influence, of him or her getting someone into trouble. We need, I think, to start recognising the positive power of influence as well.

If we could hold an accurate survey of the

attitude of youngsters towards drugs, I believe that we would find that the majority of them say that we would find that the majority of them say that they do not intend to abuse drugs, and would place themselves firmly in the camp of those who are anti-drug. Well, I would like to ask those youngsters: "What are you doing about it?" My greatest fear is that they will do what we did — nothing — and let the problem continue to grow. If they do that, then in due time they will hand the problem on to their children at such will hand the problem on to their children at such a level that their children will inherit a society a level that their condition and one that that is almost beyond imagination. And one that their children will not thank them for.

So the answer lies in their hands. They, not we, have to do the work, and all we can do is to

enable them — in the true sense of that over-worked word. We have to devise strategies that allow the youngsters that are anti-drug to have their say, to exert their influence and peer pressure against drugs and in favour of building the sort of society that they want to see. We have to strengthen them at the expense of those who would want to put forward the contrary view.

This does not mean that we have to produce vast arrays of new resource materials for drug education. There are a lot of very good resources

there already. It means looking carefully at what we are doing, and making the fundamental shift we are doong, and making the fundamental sami-away from trying to get youngsters to under-stand our view of drugs. We need to encourage them to explore and debate the issues that allow them to decide what sort of position they wish drugs to hold in the society that they are in the process of inheriting, and, more important still, are going to pass on to their children.

(We hope that this challenging viewpoint will encourage a response from our readers. It seems to us that the following basic points are

among those being addressed:

1. That the current drug-taking trend is a

2. That drug use is increasing mainly because of pro-drug peer-preassure from a minority of youngsters.

3. That shock-horror, knowledge input, and

'autonomy' have failed as educational

autonomy may further dust as educational strategies to reduce drug use.

4. That the anti-drug youngsters, although in the majority, are not actively challenging the drug trend.

5. That the task of 'educationalists' is to strengthen their hand. — Ed.)

YOUNG PEOPLE IN 1994

Shortly to be published, this is the ninth in our annual series of reports based on Health Related Behaviour Question-

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David Emmett is a serving officer of some 29 years' experience with the Hampshire Constabulary, involved full-time in school and youth liaison work. He was awarded the British Empire Medal for work with youngsters involved in solvent

abuse.

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