

Policing: drama versus substance

By Tony Pearson

This fall, an incident involving the OPP occurred just south of Bancroft. A man abruptly stopped his car on Hwy. 62 with the motor running, and sprinted off toward some brush near a number of houses. After the police arrived, they found the man 150 metres in the middle of a swampy area. As the officers approached, he initially wouldn't respond, then claimed to have a gun in the pocket of his hoodie.

That's where the incident could have taken a very familiar turn ? one we have seen all too often, especially south of the border. The man would have been shot and quite possibly killed.

However, that didn't happen here. The officers approached slowly, holding their fire. They kept talking to the man as they stood in thigh-deep water. Eventually ? after more than an hour ? they managed to get through to him and bring him under control. There were no shots fired, and no one was injured. As it turned out, the man didn't have a gun. He did, however, have mental health problems, and was also on drugs.

The officers ? Boyd Croghan, Holden Smith, and Alex Cyr ? were recognized for their actions, which not only showed bravery, but a calm intelligence. Staff sergeant Tim Spence, at a ceremony marking the first anniversary of the town's community safety plan, saluted their professionalism, demonstrating restraint in handling a dangerous situation.

The incident underscored a theme which the safety plan recognizes ? namely, that many ?incidents? that cause people to call on the police actually arise from mental illness. And the methods of dealing with mental illness are not the same as dealing with crime.

As to what happens when the two are confused, I recall an article in the *New Yorker* last year about a large number of shootings of suspects by police in New Mexico. In five years, the Albuquerque police shot 39 people, killing 20 of them. More than half were mentally ill. Yet the city of over half a million people lacks a comprehensive system for treating mental illness. Police training can be as little as six weeks, compared to 21 weeks for the OPP (which follows a lengthy intake assessment process). Although a course in crisis intervention was available in Albuquerque, almost no officers took it. However, such courses are part of OPP basic and advanced training, and put the officers in realistic simulations demanding quick ongoing assessment.

But simulations, no matter how realistic, are not the real thing. Put yourself in the position of the officers on Hwy. 62. You are face-to-face with someone who says he has a gun. Could you keep your cool? Could you follow your training about defusing such confrontations? I'm not sure that I could have.

So I'm glad that our local law officers were able to do so. They showed cool courage in not reacting instantly, and they showed mature judgment in constantly assessing the fluid situation. They averted a possible tragedy, and someone suffering from an illness can get treatment.

You'll never see such a situation portrayed in a movie or on a TV show. Taking an hour to talk someone down doesn't make for exciting drama. Arranging help is dull compared to a shoot-out. However, I don't think there are many people who would enjoy having television come to life in their community.

As far as television is involved, police officers share the experience of healthcare professionals. TV medical shows focus on cutting edge operating-room theatrics in state-of-the-art hospitals; surgeons are the stars. But the reality of building a healthy society is disease prevention and the promotion of healthy lifestyles ? again, not great TV viewing. I guess that's why there are no shows about nutritionists or diabetes educators ? just like there are no cop shows portraying case conferences about improving social services, or training staff at seniors' homes in coping with dementia problems.

If you believed television, you'd think serial killers lived on every second block. But the truth is that police running RIDE checks to keep intoxicated and distracted drivers off our roads do far more to lower the violent death rate.

In 2014, there were 1,834 traffic deaths in Canada, compared to 500 murders. But 20 years ago, road fatalities were much higher: 3,313, even though there were fewer licensed drivers. That means that highway deaths have been cut by 45 per cent ? nearly half (actually, more than half, if you adjust for the number of cars on the road). By the way, the Ontario fatality rate is well below the Canadian average.

Again, promoting and enforcing highway safety isn't glamorous. But it is incredibly important. Similarly, defusing a potentially fatal confrontation isn't something that makes a great 90 second TV clip ? but it makes our communities safer.