

"HOW A CRIME REPORTER CAN AID LAW ENFORCEMENT"

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by Peter Burden

An example of how a crime reporter can work with law agencies in an atmosphere of mutual trust was given by DAILY MAIL chief crime reporter Peter Burden when he addressed the annual conference of the International Association of Airport and Seaport Police, in Seattle, U.S. on Thursday, May 22.

Mr Burden was invited to address the association, which represents police, customs, airport security officers and insurance firm security men from more than 20 nations, following his being chosen in 1979 as Witness Box Crime Reporter of the Year (national newspaper section).

Mr Burden's address concerned the destruction of a major international cocaine smuggling and distribution syndicate with headquarters in Britain.

"The result," he said, "was that my newspaper was able to document to its six million readers a problem of great concern without jeopardising an active criminal inquiry."

Mr Burden said he decided to investigate the growth of cocaine-taking in Britain when he learned of its spread from America in 1978.

Offering cocaine

He continued: "When I made inquiries of my contacts in our customs and police departments, I discovered one unusual aspect. A group of parents from the top level of British society had heard from their daughters that some party guests were openly offering cocaine.

"A group of men inveigled themselves into parties. They offered free cocaine. They then made it clear that those who liked it and wanted more could buy the drug.

"To their great credit, the debutante girls decided to act rather than sit back and turn a blind eye. Wisely, they confided in their parents. "The parents discussed the problem and in turn contacted Scotland Yard. "I realised this was an important sociological-crime story. My inquiries reached a point

which demonstrated how police and the media can work constructively together with mutual trust.

Society parties

"The authorities were well aware of my interest in the cocaine problem and knew that I would soon be writing articles on the situation — publicity that would not at that stage have been helpful.

"Customs agents advised me that they were hopeful of breaking the smuggling syndicate supplying the society parties and suggested it could be mutually beneficial if I did not immediately rush into print.

"As the professional code of conduct of a crime reporter in Britain is never to endanger any operation targeted at bringing criminals to justice, I willingly accepted the suggestion — but still continued the research, working in parallel with police and customs.

"There was a mutual exchange of information between myself and law investigators.

Two-way talks

"While the role of a crime writer is certainly not to work as a police informer, no journalist can stand aside when he had evidence that the law is being broken, I was able to discuss what I had discovered. The conversations were two-way and conducted in an atmosphere of total confidence.

"Meanwhile the police and customs, through Interpol and by personal contacts with other law enforcement agencies, were tracking a group of couriers financed by the British-based syndicate.

"Before completing my investigation I flew to Madrid and interviewed an arrested courier for the syndicate — a Briton — a young man who had inherited a fortune on the death of his father. He was on bail and agreed to talk because he claimed he was determined to rehabilitate himself and believed publicity could help his case.

"I strongly believe that the media

should not publish interviews with criminals simply to glorify the exploits of their crimes. However, in Madrid I found a sad case indeed: a rich young man addicted to heroin. he told me how cocaine was replacing the whisky and gin in the cocktail cabinets and how many youngsters 'snorted' cocaine — not necessarily because they wanted to, but because they believed it was part of joining the 'in' set.,

"A doctor at a London hospital was one of the key organisers of the smuggling syndicate. Journalistically there was nothing sacrosanct about him. All I knew about him was published. He is now in jail.

"What I did not do was identify the girls who helped police and customs or their parents. Some of their names regularly appear in the gossip columns. But those I spoke to talked in confidence because I made it clear the articles were to inform the public of a problem; not to seek headlines identifying attractive girls from high society as police-Press 'informers'.

"The articles fulfilled the important duty of a newspaper of examining in-depth an important social problem and informing the public, and the information over nearly a year was collated with a great deal of trust on both sides.

"The result was that the law enforcement agencies in Britain were able to convict a nasty drug syndicate. Their inquiries were at no stage jeopardised by a crime writer making parallel inquiries.

No guarantee

"There is no guarantee that all cases can work out so satisfactorily. Mistakes may be made. Police may be let down. But in the service to the public, the police have so much to offer — there is so much to gain by police if the public share the knowledge of their problems, their activities, and frustrations.

"Democracy is enhanced by building a proper and open relationship between the police and the media."