



Are we no longer neighbourly?

By Christopher Bantick
January 11, 2008 12:00am

Article from: **Herald Sun**

SO you're on holiday. What have you done with the house keys? Handed them to a neighbour, asks Christopher Bantick.

Perhaps. It depends what kinds of relationship you have with those who live beside you.

More to the point, have we lost our sense of being neighbourly?

This is one of the conclusions that can be drawn from the discovery of 64-year-old Sydney man, Jorge Chambe's body.

According to police, it is likely that Chambe died alone and more tragically, he had been dead a year and no-one noticed.

This raises the question as to whether the once given civic responsibility of checking on who we live beside if we have not heard them or seen them around for a while is one we want to accept?

It seems not as increasingly Victorians are finding their neighbours problematic.

Last year, the Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria mediated in 15,757 disputes. Nearly double the case load in 2001. But this is just those which make it to mediation.

In 2006, a Department of Justice survey showed that 304,000 Victorians had issues with their neighbours.

And this is expensive.

According to Attorney General Rob Hulls, neighbourhood arguments cost taxpayers \$22 million a year. Add to this the fact that the Christmas holidays are the peak period for neighbourhood disputes.

Maybe it's something to do with the summer and the rising of the do-it-yourself sap, which is the cause for nearly half the Dispute Settlement Centre mediation.

Moreover, 47.5 per cent of calls to the DSC were relating to fences.

Such figures maybe add credence to the 17th century English proverb: "Good fences make good neighbours."

But is not just squabbles over fences that are the cause of neighbourly animus.

Overgrown or damaged plants account for 16.8 per cent of disputed, annoying behaviour, such as verbal abuse, 11.3 per cent and noise, maybe surprisingly, 4.4 per cent. Surprising as research

shows that persistent noise can make us ill.

Traffic noise, loud televisions, music, radios and barking dogs are the most troublesome and annoying noises people experience in their homes.

According to an Environment Protection Agency report released in October last year, 15 per cent of Victorians are affected by noise and significantly up on 20 years ago.

It's a reality that prompted EPA project officer Elaine Just to say that noise can make us ill. "If you are sleep-disturbed frequently and continually, that will ultimately have an impact on your health."

It is a view confirmed by Griffith University School of Environment lecturer Deanne Tomerini, who said in the light of results from an Environmental Council of Australia study last November, "unwanted sound" was damaging public health.

Furthermore, Ms Tomerini suggested that while, "noise should be given the same priority as any other health issue", it is likely that governments could expect health problems like depression, sleep disorders, learning difficulties and high blood pressure to increase.

Could it be that we have become so concerned about our privacy and space that we have lost the neighbourly touch of the cup of sugar over the back fence, the loaning of a screwdriver or even the collection of junk mail?

In the current hot weather, perhaps a friendly inquiry, particularly for the elderly, if everything is OK would not be amiss? Something no one thought to do for Jorge Chambe.

Sure Neighbourhood Watch programs are about supporting one another in reporting possible criminal activity, but this is with the safety of anonymity.

It is about protecting ourselves as much as anybody else.

Street parties at Christmas are perhaps a way of promoting better understanding of neighbours and a certain level of conviviality. Monash council even has a "how to" guide on how to hold a street party.

A quick internet search will show that there is even culinary suggestions. But even this could quickly become a bone of contention as neighbours vie for one-up-manship over the gourmet snags.

Maybe Jane Austen, not an especially brimming with fun neighbour, observed drolly and perhaps accurately in *Pride and Prejudice*: "For what do we live, but to make sport of our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?"

The problem is that a bit of a barney over a tree bough or music late at night can have unfunny and even tragic consequences.

In the Sydney suburb of Wahroonga in December, a home was vandalised by incensed neighbours throwing eggs and ripping out plants over the lilac shade of an "offending" neighbour's fence.

Even former James Bond Sean Connery's legendary charm has failed to quell an increasingly nasty neighbour dispute in Manhattan over Connery's renovations of a 1869 six-storey townhouse.

Closer to home in December, in Maude Ave, Glenroy, a feud between two families, the Andersons and the Hammouds, erupted in a 30-person all-in street brawl.

Ostensibly this was because the Hammoud's accused the Andersons of damaging their tow truck and, tit-for-tat, the Andersons accused the Hammouds of vandalising their car.

The subsequent fight ended up with two of the Hammoud family needing hospital care.

So how can we avoid the cold stare or spray of invective over the pickets?

Maybe it takes us to consider what the poet Robert Frost asked himself in his poem, Mending Wall: "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out."

That's something to talk about over the back fence.

Christopher Bantick is a Melbourne writer and social commentator.

NEWS.com.au is not responsible for the content of external sites.

**Instant desktop alerts for major
breaking news events now available.
[More details here.](#)**

