

## The GM on Ten



It's always risky pre-writing a column about something in the news. One never knows how events might unfold between the writing and the publishing. I'm writing this in early November,

so who knows what might have happened to lone sailor Jessica Watson in the last month. Let's hope nothing traumatic and that Jessica is still well and happy, wherever she is.

There are many who have been applauding Jessica's attempt to become the youngest person to sail solo non-stop and unassisted around the world. That's Jessica's ambition, openly stated on her blog.

There are others who think this is foolhardy and that Jessica should have been stopped.

I belong to the second category. I think Jessica should have been stopped.

Jessica is 16. She turned 16 on 18 May 2009. That makes Jessica a minor. She's not long out of puberty and is only about half-way through adolescence. She's still several years away from adulthood and is still developing cognitively and emotionally. Jessica cannot vote, purchase cigarettes or alcohol, gamble, get married, or go to war. She's barely able to get a learner's permit to drive a motor vehicle.

There are good reasons why Jessica and anyone else who's 16 can't legally do these things. At 16, personality is not fully developed. Cognitive functioning is still maturing. Life experience is minimal so judgement hasn't really started to form. Strategies for handling major stress are, for the most part, not even on the drawing board. There is a preoccupation with emerging independence, so egocentrism is a major factor. Many adults look back in horror at decisions and choices made in the full flight of adolescence. Physically, the body might be ready for adulthood, but emotionally and cognitively the adolescent is still in formation.

So why is a 16-year old adolescent who cannot legally vote or marry or drive a car by themselves being allowed to take off on her own for 240 days on a journey that is extraordinarily dangerous and that most experienced sailors don't bother even contemplating?

I don't know the answer to the question, but I'm tempted to describe it as culpable neglect of a minor.

Plenty has been written and said about the physical dangers Jessica will face. The response from Jessica and her support team has been "we're prepared", and anyone who's following Jessica's blog knows the extensive preparations that have been made. I imagine Jessica is fit and healthy, obviously full of self-confidence and ambition, and a very competent sailor. I also imagine that everything that can be done has and is being done to ensure Jessica's physical safety and wellbeing.

But I've seen no mention of the psychological dangers Jessica will confront and the possible risks to her mental health in undertaking such a voyage at so young an age. I believe this reflects our poor understanding of the precursors to mental health problems and our lack of genuine commitment to prevention.

During adolescence, there is ongoing maturation of neurobiological processes that underlie higher cognitive functions and social and emotional behaviour. It takes a while for a personality to stabilise. And it takes a while to get to know one's self. What's easy and what's difficult? What are the triggers for stress? And how is stress managed when it happens? In adolescence, emotional resilience has not been adequately developed or tested.

Jessica will face ongoing psychological stress during her 240 day voyage. Sleep deprivation. Recurring interruption of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. Solitude. Absence of psychosocial reference points. Hallucinations. Life-threatening events. And the nearest assistance to deal with these psychological stressors will be at the other end of a satellite phone thousands of kilometres away.

I wouldn't expose a 16-year old to any one of these events for 240 days let alone all of them. And I wouldn't expose a 16-year old to these events with no recourse to face-to-face support and no recourse to being relieved of the stressor.

The risk to Jessica is that the psychological vulnerability of adolescence combined with her lack of life experience and significant unrelenting stressors will lead to mental health problems, both during the voyage and afterwards. Impaired judgement and

decision-making, memory deficits, decreased ability to handle complex tasks, hallucinations, paranoia, anxiety, depression, and psychoses are all risks during the voyage. So is post-traumatic stress disorder after the voyage should a life-threatening event occur.

These are risks for anyone undertaking such a perilous journey. Adults are free to make their own decisions about the risks they take with their lives and their health. They also have a more stable neurobiology. A 16-year old is not an adult. So why are we allowing a minor to expose herself to these risks when we wouldn't even be letting her buy a drink in the local hotel?

I must admit to being mystified why there was no court intervention to prevent Jessica embarking on this trip. What would have happened had Jessica been 15? 14? 13? At what point would we have stopped it?

In *The Courier-Mail* on Saturday 31st October, there was a story about a 14-year old girl in the Netherlands, Laura Dekker, who wants to set off on her own record-breaking solo sailing trip around the world. Somehow, the matter ended up in the Dutch court which ruled that the 14-year old was not experienced enough to embark on the trip. The court placed Laura under the guardianship of child protection authorities, but only until she turns 15 next July. The court's decision means that Laura's parents must consult child protection authorities about all major decisions in Laura's life.

While I am relieved the Dutch court has made this ruling, the emphasis seems to be on sailing experience and risks to Laura's physical safety. There is no mention of psychological readiness or threats to mental health.

It's time we learnt more about precursors to mental health problems. And took prevention seriously. Allowing Jessica Watson to take off on this voyage is an indication of how ill-informed we are about it.

***The GM on Ten is an opinion piece  
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