

Blitz on gay bashing gangs

By JOHN STAPLETON

Tony is angry, very angry. He was found unconscious after being attacked in Burton Street, Darlinghurst, recently.

He did not see who did it, but was left with a black eye, cuts, and a fractured cheek bone.

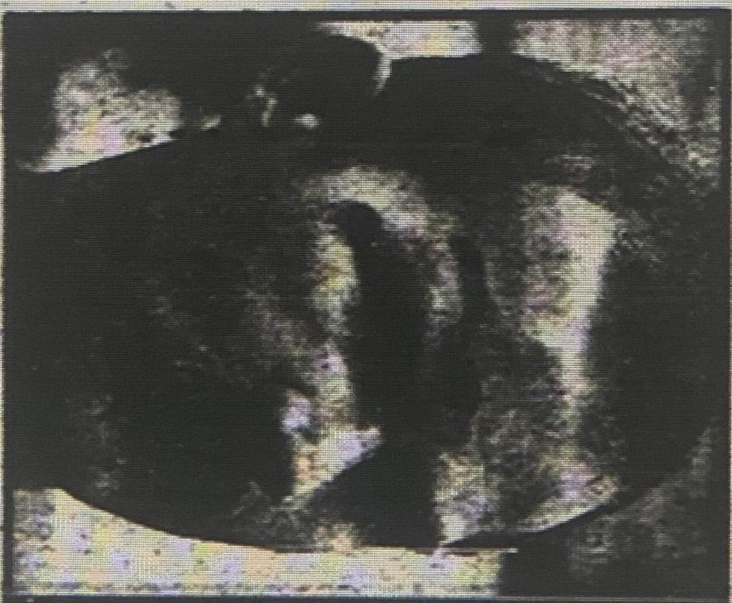
Tony, 30, is one of a growing number of gay men and women who are being bashed by gangs, some with children as young as 10.

"This has been going on for too long and nothing seems to be being done about it," said Tony. "Twenty of my friends have been bashed in the past year. One had to have his teeth sewn back into his mouth."

The increase in violence has provoked a strong reaction among gay men and women, with more than 600 marching in protest last weekend.

Now four inner-city police stations have assigned officers to co-ordinate reports of gay bashing. Gay and lesbian police liaison officer Ms Sue Thompson said plain-clothes officers were trying to trace attackers.

Executive Chief Superintendent Alf Pente, of the Sydney Police District, said there had been at least 30 bashings in the past two months including one murder.



Victim Tony ... very angry.

"This situation is very serious and police will not tolerate sections of the community being targeted for street violence in this way," he said.

He urged victims to report assaults immediately so that offenders could be identified and arrested.

"We don't really know how big the problem is," he said. "It could be that the problem is significantly greater than is being reported. If it is, we need to know."

He said to ensure police attitudes were fair and understanding, an educational program on dealing with the gay community had been set up at Surry Hills.

The Minister for Police, Mr Pickering, has agreed to launch a report on gay violence called Streetwatch, by the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, within a fortnight.

The report, compiled after 67 people responded to gay newspaper and radio appeals, shows 90 per cent of attacks are by men under 25 in gangs up to 15-strong.

The majority occur around Oxford Street in Darlinghurst, and King Street in Newtown, where there are prominent gay bars. Eighty per cent of victims, whose average age is 32, suffer head injuries, while more than 50 per cent have limbs broken or other serious injuries.

The report contains a number of recommendations to the police, health and education ministers.

Mr Bruce Grant, co-convenor of the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, said: "Violence is more than just a police issue. It is an education and health issue. Everyone has the right to live in an environment which does not promote bigotry."