

Therapists still offering treatments for homosexuality despite lack of evidence

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A significant minority of psychiatrists and therapists are still attempting to help lesbian, gay and bisexual clients become heterosexual despite lack of evidence that such treatment is beneficial or even safe, according to research funded by the Wellcome Trust.

The research, published today in the open access journal *BMC Psychiatry*, coincides with the launch of the website www.treatmentshomosexuality.org.uk. The website gathers together oral histories from lesbian, gay and bisexual people who have undergone treatment as well as from professionals who developed and conducted such treatments.

Researchers from UCL (University College London) and St George's, University of London, question over 1,400 [mental health](#) professionals on whether they would attempt to change a client's [sexual orientation](#) if requested. Although only one in twenty-five (4%) said that they would do so, one in six (17%) reported having assisted at least one client to reduce their gay or lesbian feelings, usually through therapy. Therapists were also asked in what year they had conducted such therapy and there was no sign of a decrease in recent times.

"There is very little evidence to show that attempting to treat a person's homosexual feelings is effective and in fact it can actually be harmful," says Professor Michael King from UCL. "So it is surprising that a significant minority of practitioners still offer this help to their clients."

Professor King and colleagues found that a number of reasons were given by the [psychiatrists](#) and therapists for offering assistance, ranging from the counsellor's own moral and [religious views](#) about homosexuality through to a desire to help patients who were stressed by discrimination. There was also a degree of ignorance about the lack of evidence surrounding such the efficacy of such therapies - in particular, that no randomised control trials have ever been conducted that show that the therapies are effective.

Comments from the counsellors who offered assistance included:

"Where someone had a strong faith, then working to help the person accept their feelings but manage them appropriately may be the best approach if [the] person felt they would lose God and therefore their life was not worth living."

"The individuals I have worked with have all been very unhappy about their sexuality and wish they were heterosexual. This has been because of responses from friends, family and the local community - which outside London is still very homophobic."

"Children and young adults are more likely to be confused about their sexuality and to jump to conclusions (correct or otherwise) if unable to talk through their concerns."

"Although homosexual feelings are usual in people, their physical expression, and being a person's only way of having sexual relations is problematic. The physical act for male homosexuals is physically damaging and is the main reason in this country for AIDS/HIV. It is also perverse."

Professor King believes that it is important to raise awareness amongst both therapists and the wider public about homosexuality and its so-

called treatments.

"The best approach is to help people adjust to their situation, to value them as people and show them that there is nothing whatever pathological about their sexual orientation," he says. "Both mental health practitioners and society at large must help them to confront prejudice in themselves and in others."

The researchers have launched a new website, www.treatmentshomosexuality.org.uk, which aims to help raise awareness and collect oral histories from both mental health practitioners and the people they have treated.

Commenting on the research, Derek Munn, Director of Public Affairs at the gay and lesbian equality organisation Stonewall, says: "So-called gay cure therapies are wholly discredited. The conclusions of this research are a welcome reminder that what lesbian and gay people need is equal treatment by society, not misguided treatment by a minority of health professionals."

Source: Wellcome Trust ([news](#) : [web](#))

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