

Homosexuality and freedom of speech

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Editor's note

Dr Catterall was the Chairman at a symposium entitled 'Homosexuality: congenital or acquired?' organised under the auspices of the London Medical Group in October 1979. He describes here how this symposium was so badly disrupted that the papers by Dr Sidney Crown and Dr Malcolm MacCulloch could not be presented as prepared. These papers will follow Dr Catterall's introduction.

Homosexuality has always been a controversial subject and still arouses strong feelings, not only among the general public, but also among professional people including some doctors. However, recent changes in attitudes to sex, especially greater tolerance and understanding of various types of sexual activity, have encouraged more objective and scientific studies of the condition. In many medical schools students have opportunities to discuss existing knowledge and to obtain clinical experience with patients who come to doctors for help and guidance. These changes have resulted in a situation where in most medical and scientific circles free and objective discussion of homosexuality is now quite common without dogmatic statements or obvious prejudice.

Unfortunately this is not always the case in non-medical circles. Throughout the 1970s there has been a tendency for a number of homosexual men to advertise their sexual orientation and self-proclaimed liberation in an aggressive, strident and exhibitionist manner. They have often been totally intolerant of those working in the field as well as others with a sympathetic and understanding attitude to the situation. This has resulted in scientific and medical meetings packed by noisy demonstrators, whose raucous and vulgar behaviour has disrupted scientific discussion and in some cases reduced the proceedings to the shouting of slogans and compulsive exhibitionist behaviour of a totally inappropriate nature.

On the 23 October 1979, for example, the London Medical Group held a symposium entitled 'Homosexuality: congenital or acquired?' at The Middlesex Hospital Medical School. There were three speakers, Dr M J MacCulloch of Liverpool, Professor Ivor Mills of Cambridge and Dr Sidney Crown of The London Hospital, all of whom have made important contributions to the understanding of homosexuality. The lecture theatre was packed with doctors, medical stu-

dents, nurses, social workers and others, many of whom had travelled considerable distances to hear the speakers and take part in the discussion. Before the meeting started it was obvious that there was a small disruptive element present but it was also clear that the vast majority of the audience had come to listen to the speakers.

Exhibitionist behaviour

The first speaker had only just started when a barrage of chanting and shouting of slogans made it difficult for the audience to hear. This rapidly deteriorated to the shouting of personal abuse at the speakers and the use of obscenities. Exhibitionist behaviour spread among the minority, who were obviously determined to disrupt the meeting, characterised by stylised feminine posturing and even undressing at the front of the hall. Despite appeals for order and quiet the speakers were quite unable to make themselves heard and decided that they could not continue with the symposium. I, the chairman, therefore, adjourned the meeting. Later an informal group of medical students and others met in the hall and were able to discuss some aspects of homosexuality in a less emotionally charged atmosphere.

This unfortunate episode resulted in the total disruption of the symposium on an important contemporary topic, organised by the London Medical Group well known for its wide range of lectures on issues raised by the practice of medicine and for its encouragement of the expression of minority views. A small number of determined people planted in the lecture theatre had been able to prevent the vast majority of the audience from hearing about the research work of three distinguished physicians and from taking part in discussion afterwards. Unfortunately this is not the first time that such activities by similar groups on the same subject have interrupted meetings and spoiled the quality of the discussion. It is, however, the first time that speakers have been prevented from addressing their audience and a fundamental freedom has been denied them.

Suppressing free discussion

In modern society the activities of small groups who hold emotionally charged and intolerant opinions on a variety of topics can easily disrupt meetings and suppress free discussion. The difference between violence

on the football terraces and the disruption of scientific meetings of learned societies is not so great that we can afford to be complacent about it. The question must be asked, why is it difficult, indeed often impossible, to discuss homosexuality in public in a quiet, disciplined and thoughtful way?

Minority groups are often their own worst enemies and their behaviour is frequently counterproductive

and damages the public image of their cause. The disrupters themselves often do not have a clear idea as to why they behave in a particular way, nor are their long-term motives always understandable. Homosexual men have achieved a great deal of tolerance and freedom for themselves and their cause is ill-served by the small number of demonstrators who take it upon themselves to deny freedom of speech to others.

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