

“CUT THE TRUTH OUT OF MY BRAIN... IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT!?”

Not that long ago, convicted gays were subjected to medical treatments that were tantamount to torture. Matthew Myers reports on our shocking history.



James Bligh (David Berry) attempts escape.

For many, the 1950s represent a post-war period of rock'n'roll, drive-in movies, and women called Betty wearing starched polka dot dresses. Nuclear families produced the Baby Boomer generation, Elvis Presley made women swoon and a zany redhead named Lucille Ball brought laughter to the world. But while the world laughed at Lucy, watched 3-D movies and rocked around the clock, gay life in the 1950s was a whole other story.

Back then, gay people did not have the pleasures so commonly taken for granted today. There were no gay magazines or dating apps, no countries that welcomed gay marriage and certainly no fun-filled Mardi Gras. Being homosexual was not only considered a mental illness, but if you happened to be outed you faced a criminal conviction and in many cases a form of horrendous medical treatment designed as a cure. Such treatment was often the alternative to doing time behind bars.

While it is hard to believe that something so barbaric happened, there are quite a few documented cases and many men still around to tell the tale. Known as aversion therapy, the method involved conditioning the patient by means of exposure to a stimulus while at the same time being subject to discomfort, usually a painful shock. Treatment included having electrodes attached to the genital area while being shown gay porn as well as being administered vomit-inducing or hallucinogenic drugs. Only when the images were replaced with what were considered normal pictures, such as Betty in a polka dot

“Treatment included having electrodes attached to the genital area while being shown gay porn as well as being administered vomit-inducing or hallucinogenic drugs.”

dress, did the abuse stop. The idea was that by associating pain with bad behaviour, a homosexual (or deviant, as they were known) would be cured. In other words, what was hoped for was a Pavlov's Dog effect – but even dogs will only go so far before biting their master's hand. Movies such as Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Latter Days* (2003) or television's *American Horror Story*, featuring Sarah Paulson as a lesbian

character, show various examples of this treatment.

Aversion therapy has its roots in Nazi Germany where countless gay men were tortured and experimented upon with so-called renunciation tests under the brutal military commander Heinrich Himmler. In concentration camps, male homosexuals were considered the lowest of the low and aversion therapy experimentation involved heinous forms of surgery not unlike something from *Frankenstein*.

It wasn't just the gays who were targeted with aversion therapy throughout the '50s and '60s. Transvestites, exhibitionists, alcoholics, shoplifters and others with so-called behavioural problems were also recommended for such treatment. Sadly, in the case of our gay forefathers, many were forced by their families into psychiatric institutions to undergo these procedures and in extreme cases were castrated or given lobotomies. Dr Walter Freeman, who famously performed his ice pick lobotomy on JFK's sister Rosemary Kennedy (which left her permanently incapacitated), performed this same procedure on thousands of others, around 40 percent on gay patients.

In the case of aversion therapy, it is also not surprising that some patients paid the ultimate price of death. Such revelations came to light through a '90s BBC documentary titled *Sexual Aversion*. The horrific case of Billy Clegg-Hill saw a gay man targeted in a 1962 police bust in Southampton, England. For the crime of



Dr Christian Jessen hits the road for his documentary about gay conversion clinics.



Gay conversion: if this image doesn't get you aroused, prepare for torture.

homosexuality, Clegg-Hill was sentenced to six months compulsory aversion therapy at a military psychiatric hospital. After a mere three days he was dead. The final insult – his cause of death was listed as “natural causes”.

It was also in the 1990s that openly gay British comedian and radio presenter Peter Price went public with his own aversion therapy experience. After coming out to his mother at the age of 18, Price was put into a psychiatric ward where he was played audio tapes demeaning homosexuality and he was injected with drugs that made him violently ill. For 72 hours he was forced to lie in his own vomit and excrement and after discovering that the next stage of treatment involved electric shocks to his penis, Price begged to be released and managed to be freed. Two months later he had accepted that he was well and truly gay. In an ironic twist, while visiting a local gay bar

he came across the very psychiatrist who had treated him.

Into the 1970s aversion therapy was still taking place in research universities and many family members have since come forward claiming how such treatment led their loved ones to mental illness and even suicide. Surprisingly, aversion therapy still exists today to treat sex offenders and, yes, even gay people.

In recent years, religious groups in particular have come under fire for their role in anti-gay sentiment and attempts to cure homosexuals. Only last year, 43-year-old Damien Christie took his own life after undergoing gay conversion therapy at a Christian ministry in Melbourne. Christie's case prompted mental health groups such as Beyondblue and Headspace to speak out against gay religious suicide. Many have suggested that religious organisations need to modernise their

thinking and catch up with the rest of society, especially since it is now four decades since psychiatrists declared that homosexuality is not a mental illness.

Openly gay doctor and host of Britain's *Embarrassing Bodies*, Christian Jessen, recently made a documentary uncovering some of the gay cure establishments, mostly in the United States. In *Undercover Doctor: Cure Me, I'm Gay*, Jessen tests, or rather exposes, the organisations and clinics that provide a so-called gay cure. Provoked by a confused patient who visited him in search of help, Jessen decided to highlight the seriousness of the topic and discovered a frightening and unethical culture that included, of all things, a pastor conducting exorcisms on gay men. Jessen also encountered a retired Texan doctor who, as part of his gay-to-straight therapy, believed that Adele's music encouraged homosexuality, and should be replaced with good Christian tunes. Considering Adele's fans include John Mayer, Bruno Mars and 007 himself Daniel Craig (who said he was moved to tears the first time he heard *Skyfall*), can we expect them all to suddenly turn gay?

Jessen's program evoked an emotional and outraged response from viewers who were shocked and saddened to learn of such practices operating in Western countries. One viewer summed it up by suggesting there should be an aversion therapy program for homophobes. Others have raised the interesting challenge of what if there was a forced-on program to make straight people gay? That alone gives much food for thought.

There is light at the end of the tunnel, which first came in 1994 when the American Psychological Association (APA) declared gay aversion therapy simply does not work and is dangerous. The APA and many governments around the globe now embrace gay affirmation psychotherapy, which not only encourages the acceptance of same-sex desires, but also holds the view that such treatment can help recovery from mental illnesses and substance abuse.

With same-sex marriage becoming a reality in many countries, and the wider acceptance of gay people in Western society, it is hard to believe that the days of aversion therapy were not so long ago. Sadly, some are still in practice due to many archaic religious institutions. While there are those unaware that aversion therapy exists, it is even more alarming that many young gay people have no idea of the pain and heartache suffered by their historic counterparts. It was a suffering that led to the recognition and rights that we hold today. The rainbow flag represents many components of the gay community and the struggle for equality. This is one aspect that should not become a footnote in our history.

more: If you are confused or depressed about your sexuality and in need of help contact Lifeline on 131 114 or beyondblue.org.au or headspace.org.au