



PAGING DOCTOR BRAD!

From *Embarrassing Bodies* to *The Today Show*, Dr Brad McKay is Aussie TV's dreamiest medic. But growing up, his sexuality brought him into conflict with his strict religious family. He tells Matthew Myers about his "pray the gay away" past, the post-HIV world, ghosts, UFOs and Kylie.

DNA: You grew up in New Zealand with a very religious family. How did that affect your coming out?

Brad McKay: I grew up with two older sisters and I remember when they were teenagers my mum wanted them to go to church. Being rebellious, they just didn't want to. So mum grabbed them by the clothes and hair, shoved them into the car, drove away and threw them out like a mob drop, saying, "You're going to church youth group!" With no way of getting home they had to go. As time went on they made friends and got involved in the church. An interesting way of introducing your children to the church.

Weren't you dragged along, too?

My sisters eventually took me and, being younger, I was always the good child doing the right things. But it was difficult, especially during my teenage years, when I was more attracted to guys than girls,

and being told it was wrong. I also had no one to talk to. That was a big deal.

So how did you eventually come out?

I went backwards and forwards from the church, had a few girlfriends and tried to fit into the church model of what 'God wanted' for my life but the more I tried the less it worked. I finally came out at around 24 to my family. It was difficult living a life with desires that are quite forceful and concentrated, against what you're told your body is meant to be doing. It's very confusing in that church environment.

In regard to your family's reaction, where did that go and where is it now?

My sisters wanted to "fix" me. One of them sought out a psychologist for me to "pray the gay away" and make me straight. Then my parents started blaming themselves. My mum was saying things like, "It's because your dad didn't play sport with you." There was a lot of blaming going on. They started going to church groups for support, and that was damaging because my whole family was learning that their son was broken and they needed to fix him – that it was part of God's plan. That was difficult to deal with.

Did you feel like the fulcrum in a bad situation?

Yes. It makes you feel like you're the problem for your whole family, and in their heart of hearts you

need to be corrected. To them it was like, "What have we done to create a son like this?"

How are your family relationships now?

It's been an interesting period recently with the Safe Schools program. One of my sisters was advocating a petition against it. For me, growing up and not having anyone to talk to, and not having support, I feel very strongly that the Safe Schools program would be good. But she feels it's a program recruiting people to make them gay or transgender, which is ridiculous. We discussed it and she didn't want to step down from her position and neither did I. That really fractured our relationship. I've looked for support from the rest of my family and that relationship has actually become stronger. They've been more supportive, loving and caring, because they could see what's happened with my other sister and how she's behaved. I think it's very difficult for a lot of gay men and lesbians who have that fragmentation in their families.

It sounds like things are improving?

Yeah, especially my parents, who are on a bit of a journey. They're getting better and more at ease with it. They're realising that it's not their fault. That's one of the big things – that they're not blaming themselves.

Did you experience homophobia at school?

I came across as a quiet high-achiever. I didn't rock the boat. I think that happens to a lot of gay guys – they don't want to be outspoken but rather the chameleon in the class. I didn't get harassed but a lot of my friends who were more outwardly gay were physically abused and harassed. A lot wouldn't have known about my sexuality, but I was sticking up for them and tried to neutralize the situation.

What advice would you give to anyone who is subjected to homophobia or bullying?

Address the issue and call it out. If people are being harassed they are inclined to go quiet and into a shell so as not to cause a fuss. Unfortunately, that often makes things escalate and worsen with time. It's a matter of getting help and finding someone who's on your side for support. Even somebody of authority like a principal or senior teacher, and that's a part of what the Safe Schools Coalition is about.

You are passionate about mental health. Do you feel the community in general is now taking it more seriously?

People are more accepting of it. There's less stigma with mental health issues now but we still have a long way to go. People are still struggling, especially in the gay community.

What can the everyday person do to make a difference for others?

Asking the question, "Are you okay?" is one of the best things you can do. It's about looking out for each other. If someone is going through a bad time, address it rather than letting it becoming the elephant in the room.

As a doctor dealing with the LGBTI community, what do you think is currently our biggest issue?

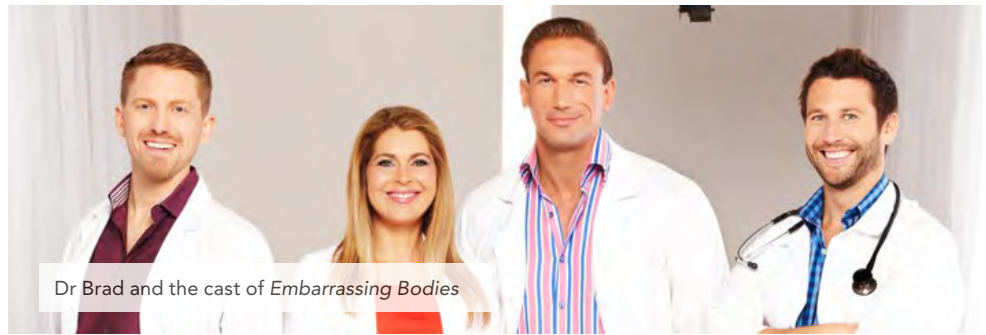
Getting people onto PrEP. Every year in Australia over 1,000 people are newly diagnosed with HIV infection. PrEP can make a difference in decreasing the number of new infections. There are concerns that guys won't use condoms if PrEP is available and that rates of other sexually transmitted infections will go up but studies, so far, haven't shown this. Guys taking PrEP are carefully monitored and screened for STIs, so we're actually able to diagnose and treat other infections early before they can spread.

How close are we to eradicating HIV/AIDS?

The medication we use these days is so effective that AIDS is now very rare in Australia. We're not seeing the same horrendous infections we used to see in the '80s and '90s and we're concentrating on stopping new cases. Our aim is to make such a dent that by 2020 we won't have any new cases of HIV. PrEP has the ability to make this a reality.

Considering the history of HIV and AIDS, that would be quite an achievement.

Well, it was only in 2013 that treatment improved so much that people living with HIV could expect



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to live just as long as everybody else. HIV is no longer a life sentence, and people now live happy and healthy lives. These days HIV is managed like any other health problem – like having diabetes. If you have regular check ups and take the right medication, it's totally manageable.

Do you think that Millennials are more complacent than Gen X or the Baby Boomers who grew up with the fear of AIDS?

As a general rule, yes. I find that people over 35 are a bit more vigilant about protection and using condoms. They have seen a lot more people with HIV/AIDS in their past and either heard of or seen them die. That's still in their consciousness. I also find that people in their mid-40s are very vigilant about using protection and some won't even use PrEP.

As the host of *Embarassing Bodies* you must see a lot of unusual cases?

When I started doing the show some of my friends said, "How do you cope with those embarrassing bodies?" I'd look at them, confused, thinking, "Don't you know what I do for a living?" People are shocked with the way some bodies look and how we cope as doctors, but it's what we do every day. Doing the show is nothing compared to a day at the clinic!

What do you think of fictional TV medical dramas like *Grey's Anatomy*, *House* and *ER*?

Are they authentic or do you cringe?

I remember watching *House* and deciding it would be my favourite series. Then, after a few episodes, I was shocked at how rubbish it was. The doctors were breaking and entering into patients' houses and being weird "doctor detectives"! The one that comes

up tops time and again for medical authenticity is actually *Scrubs*.

A little-known fact about you is that you're on the committee of Australian Skeptics. How does such an organisation work?

The skeptics group is evidence-based and looks at the truths in various treatments. Evidence-based medicine is my bag at the moment, but we also look into things like yowies, ghosts, UFOs and such. It's a very important group, especially in the aspect of medicine. One part of the group is making sure that kids get vaccinated and that we are protecting people from potentially deadly diseases. There's a lot of activism online with people spreading rumours that vaccinations are dangerous and that their kids shouldn't have them. Our group counteracts that.

Who is Dr Brad's diva?

I grew up addicted to Lisa Loeb's album *Tails*. She's geeky and alternative and amazing. But, really, it was always Kylie, with the ultimate song being *Spinning Around*. I like the fun Kylie rather than the dark sultry Kylie. My sisters would dress up as Madonna with the lace gloves.

But Madonna's so pro-gay.

Oh, they don't like her now. One of my sisters and my mother were massive Anthony Callea fans, too, and when he came out they were like, "I don't know if we can still support him." One sister liked Adam Lambert until she found out he was gay!

What do you think about the doctor fantasy that often comes up in porn?

[Laughing] Isn't it always a plumber or a delivery boy? Some people fantasize about doctor/nurse/patient shenanigans but for me it would be like, "I don't want to be at work!" Do you want to have sex with people that you're working with?

Some people would!

Well, it's a bit of a joke, too. Some of my friends say, "Oh yeah, I can't wait to go to the doctor to have my prostate examined again." It's a tongue-in-cheek scenario.

Tongue in cheek?!

Hopefully not the doctor's!

MORE: *Embarassing Bodies* screens on Lifestyle YOU.
Go to www.lifestyle.com.au