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Mormon 'Gay Cure' Study Used Electric Shocks Against Homosexual Feelings

Homosexuality still considered 'worse than murder' among Mormons.

By SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES
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Is There a Shot to Cure Homophobia?

One gay Mormon speaks out about his internal struggle.

March 30, 2011— -- John Cameron said he was a naive and devout [Mormon](#) who felt "out of sync" with the world, when he volunteered to be part of a study of "electric aversion therapy" in 1976 at Utah's [Brigham Young University](#).

Twice a week for six months, he jolted himself with painful shocks to the penis to rid himself of his attraction to men.

"I kept trying to fight it, praying and fasting and abstaining and being the best person I could," said Cameron, now a 59-year-old playwright and head of the acting program at the University of Iowa.

"I was never actively gay, never had any encounters with men -- never had moments when I failed and actually had sex with other men," he said.

But his undercurrent of feelings put him in direct conflict with the [Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints](#) (LDS) and its principles.

"As teens we were taught that homosexuality was second only to murder in the eyes of God," he said.

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"I was very, very religious and the Mormon church was the center of my life," said Cameron, who had done missionary work in Guatemala and El Salvador.

The 1976 study at Brigham Young, "[Effect of Visual Stimuli in Electric Aversion Therapy](#)," was written by Max Ford McBride, then a graduate student in the psychology department.

"I thought he was my savior," said Cameron, who enrolled with 13 other willing subjects, all Mormons who thought they might be gay, for a three- to six-month course of therapy.

A mercury-filled tube was placed around the base of his penis to measure the level of stimulation he experienced when viewing nude images of men and women.

Shocks, given in three 10-second intervals, were then administered in conjunction with certain images. Participants set their own pain levels.

Cameron said his shame was so deep that he selected the highest level.

"Max didn't do it, we did it," he said. "I was always turning it up to get the most pain because I was desperate."

Homosexuals were seen as a "prurient, expendable population," according to Cameron. "To admit homosexuality in 1976 was the kiss of death. You could be targeted, lose your job, lose your income, lose everything."

And those weren't the only attempted cures that were used in that era. Others allege they were given chemical compounds, which were administered through an IV and caused subjects to vomit when they were stimulated.

Psychologists confirm those harsh experiments were used in a variety of medical settings by scientists of all faiths.

Church officials say they no longer support aversion therapy, but a generation who grew up in the 1970s say they have been scarred for life because of well-intentioned attempts to change their sexual orientation.

Today, the church still steadfastly opposes homosexuality, as witnessed by the millions of dollars in support it gave to pass California's [Proposition 8](#), which would amend the state's constitution to outlaw gay marriage.

Carri P. Jenkins, assistant to the president of BYU, confirmed that McBride did study the effects of aversion therapy in the 1970s. She said the experiment was an "outgrowth of the behaviorist movement, which believed that any behavior could be modified.

"Our understanding is that most behaviorists no longer believe this is an

appropriate treatment for those who are seeking change," she said.

Jenkins said other universities at the time used similar techniques, and none of this type has taken place at BYU since then.

"The BYU Counseling Center never practiced therapy that would involve chemical or induced vomiting," she said.

Today, therapies are all "mainline therapeutic approaches," according to Jenkins, and all faculty are expected to be licensed and programs accredited.

The university, which is owned by the Mormon Church, said its policy on homosexuality is in line with Mormon doctrine -- today's students are not disciplined unless they engage in sexual activity, and that includes heterosexual sex before marriage.

"BYU will respond to homosexual behavior rather than to feelings or attraction, and welcomes as full members of the university community all whose behavior meets university standards," said Jenkins. "Members of the university community can remain in good standing if they conduct their lives in a manner consistent with Gospel principles."

Play About 1976 Shock Therapy Opens

Cameron, who is now [openly gay](#), wrote a play about his shock therapy experience, "14," which includes much of McBride's controversial dissertation. "I think we need to know the story, to learn from it."

The show, which explores his struggle with coming out, [opened at University of Iowa](#) in 2007, Kent State University in 2009 and is being performed at the University of Colorado in Boulder in October.

"They thought they were doing something to help me," he said of the experiment. "I can't fault them for that. But now that they are educated, now we know homosexuality is not a choice, people are born this way. The church doesn't still have to be threatened by homosexuality."

ABCNews.com left two telephone messages for McBride, who is now a psychologist in Provo, Utah, but there was no reply.

Cameron had dated girls at BYU and even been engaged a couple of times, but said he always knew those relationships were doomed to failure.

He confessed his struggle to a psychology professor and asked for help. The response ended up in Cameron's play: "No one is a homosexual. Homosexuality doesn't exist. It's just a symptom of a deeper problem you are not willing to deal with."

Cameron said he was deemed a success and was "desperate" enough to

believe the therapy worked. But he said it pushed him "deeper and deeper into [my] own closet."

During the study, Cameron said McBride suggested he wear a rubber band on his wrist and snap it if he had inappropriate thoughts. "I got the thin ones so they would hurt more," he said. "Some days I would come home and have bloody wrists."

Connell O'Donovan, who now works at the University of California, Santa Cruz, told ABCNews.com he was sent to BYU in 1976 for vomit therapy, but couldn't go through with it.

BYU said its counseling services never conducted such treatment, but O'Donovan counters that he was evaluated by Joseph Smith Family Living Center, another service on campus.

In 1986, he said he volunteered for "extremely debilitating hypnotherapy" through another Utah counseling center. He said a Mormon intern hypnotized him, splitting him into "Gay Connell" and "Straight Connell."

"He then had me visualize Jesus coming down through the ceiling and utterly destroying Gay Connell to dust and then 'a mighty wind' blowing all the dust away," said O'Donovan. "This is the single most emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually crippling experience of my entire life."

"Some 18 years later I am still healing from that traumatic "therapeutic" experience," he writes in a [2004 essay on his journey](#).

ABCNews.com asked officials at [LDS offices](#) in Salt Lake City to comment on O'Donovan's allegations.

"This is a sensitive topic for all parties involved," said Jessica Moody, an LDS public affairs associate

She referred to [official statements on homosexuality](#) on their web site.

It states: "The Lord's law of moral conduct is abstinence outside of lawful marriage and fidelity within marriage. Sexual relations are proper only between husband and wife, appropriately expressed within the bonds of marriage. Any other sexual conduct, including fornication, adultery, and homosexual and lesbian behavior is sinful. Those who persist in such practices or influence others to do so are subject to Church discipline."

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[Charles Silverstein](#), a clinical psychologist with New York City's [Institute for Human Identity](#), said every psychiatric and mental health organization opposes aversion therapy.

Silverstein was recently given the [American Psychological Association](#)

Lifetime-Achievement Award for helping to remove "homosexuality" from the list of illnesses in psychiatry's "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders" in 1973.

"There is no treatment for homosexuality today in the professional community," said Silverstein. "All of them are on the record as saying that homosexuality is within the normal range of human behavior."

Of his clinical patients over the years, he said those who were Mormon "suffered the most."

"It's really a very tight community," he said. "The advantage of a tight community is that it offers a lot of support when needed. This disadvantage is control and they exert a lot of control. They do a number on people."

Play About 1976 Shock Therapy Opens

David Melson, president of the advocacy group [Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons](#), said anecdotal information suggests suicide rates among gay Mormons may be higher than in the general population.

Affirmation collects data from multiple sources, including The Trevor Project, the American Psychological Association and ER physicians

"It is very hard to track this sort of thing because family members, the church and well-intentioned hospital staffs will often tend to not report a death as a suicide," Melson said.

LGBT youth in general are at greater risk for suicide, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

"It's not just child suicides, but adults in a culture that's built so much around family and marriage and eternal families," said Melson.

"The Mormon doctrine is built around a plan of salvation -- that the earth life is only a small part of your life," Melson said. "You live before and continue to live on through eternities and continue to grow and progress as mortals. Progression depends on family relationships and procreation and gay people can interrupt that pattern of procreation."

Jason Conner, 26, said he struggled with gay feelings while serving in a leadership role on his Mormon mission in Florida in 2006.

"I was suicidal," he said. "I couldn't live with the pressure. I was feeling so unholy."

He said he was sent to "conversion therapy" in Orlando where for a year he was told if he practiced his faith and prayed, feelings of same-sex attraction would go away.

"I had a rubber band that I would flick every time I thought about it," he

said. "Whenever I would see a man, I would have to picture myself in a bathtub full of worms."

Though therapy lifted his depression, he said he was set on a disastrous path: He was to move to Utah, within six months find a girl and then six months later, be engaged. Conner enrolled at BYU and made it to the engagement, but then broke it off.

ABCNews.com called LDS Services for comment on Conner's allegations, but no one returned the phone call.

When Conner finally left the church, he said he was alienated from friends and family.

"I had devoted so much time to this culture," he said. "I didn't know any non-Mormon people. To lose so much was pretty rough."

Since then, he has come out and works for Soul Force, an LGBT group that fights religious and political homophobia.

"I feel lucky my experience wasn't so severe," he said of the therapy. "They still do a lot of in-your-face exorcisms and hold people down and spit on them. They teach you how to be a man and hold you down and pass the demons out of you."

David Pruden, who is president of [Evergreen International](#), which provides referral services for Mormons struggling with same-sex attraction, said that he had heard about severe techniques used by fringe groups.

"Every once in awhile we hear about them," he said, "But we don't refer to anybody like that. ... Things like that scare me and it's about people who don't have much training doing amateur stuff.

"All those things are based in self-loathing and self-punishing and are counterproductive," Pruden said. "Our main goal help person come to sense of peace."

Church doctrine is "rigid" and "clear," he said, but extends "love" and support to those who need help. Evergreen recommends counseling services that use a variety of talk therapies.

"People who are motivated and have faith seem to deal with [same-sex feelings] in varying degrees of success," Pruden said. "The bottom line is, if you are at peace with yourself and God, that will help you to get where you want to go."

Pruden, who is a Mormon bishop in his ward, said ex-communication is a last resort after probation and several other steps of reintegration into the church have failed. It is equally applied to sins of heterosexuality as homosexuality, and it is the behavior that is judged, not the thoughts, he

said.

"The problem comes at the point when your life becomes so incongruent with the obvious values of the church and it becomes difficult for the church," he said.

"It's a very painful process of losing your membership," Pruden said. "There is a heritage of love attachment that happens to Latter-Day Saints. ... There is a lot of hurt and I feel for those people."

As for Cameron and others who survived the therapies of the 1970s, depression and guilt followed.

Cameron said he bought razor blades and contemplated suicide, but never had the courage to kill himself. He eventually left the church.

"It was a Catch-22," said Cameron. "If you prayed hard enough and wanted it hard enough, God would answer your prayers. But when nothing happened, it was our fault. We didn't want it bad enough or didn't pray enough. You didn't win."

But he doesn't blame the church, one that he says is "quintessentially American."


"The Mormon Church gave me a great deal," he said. "They gave me the high standards that I still live by. They gave me an attitude that I can accomplish anything within my ability if I work at it."

After coming out in graduate school and later embarking on play writing, Cameron said he still missed the sense of community and rituals.

"Even after leaving the church, most ex-Mormons will tell you, you carry this life-long connection to it -- every time you hear the hymns."

But today, just as his protagonist in "14," Cameron said his demons have finally been purged.

"The hymns stopped playing in my head," he said. "I finally let go of it all."

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