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Gays tell of mutilation by apartheid army (Guardian)

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Gays tell of mutilation by apartheid army

A report detailing castration and electric shocks adds weight to calls for doctors to be held to account over abuses

By Chris McGreal in Johannesburg

The part-man, part-woman who still calls himself Harold is trying to gather the courage to finally fight back against South Africa's military. It was the army, after all, which abandoned him more than a decade ago, part way through "treatment" to turn him from a male to a female under a discredited policy of trying to "cure" homosexual conscripts.

"I now know that in one sense I was just unlucky. The army had whole gay battalions who they just shunted aside and let be. But if things went wrong and you ended up in the hands of the psychologists then it could get very bad. In my case it began with the electric shocks and only ended after they'd already given me breasts, and then the army said it had abandoned the whole policy," he said.

He is not alone. Thousands of other gays were subjected to electric shock therapy, hormone treatment and chemical castration through the 1970s and 80s, when national service was compulsory for white males and homosexuality was a crime.

Some lesbians were also given "cures".

An as-yet unpublished report, called the Aversion Project, commissioned by gay rights groups and South Africa's medical research council, details the extent of the abuses and is expected to form the basis of demands for corrective treatment, and

demands that the doctors behind the “treatments” be held accountable by the medical authorities.

The attempts to “cure” homosexuals began after the creation of the infamous ward 22 at the Voortrekkerhoogte military hospital near Pretoria in 1969. The ward, which ostensibly catered for servicemen with psychological problems, was under the command of an army colonel and psychologist, Aubrey Levin.

Aversion therapy

Dr Levin treated genuinely disturbed patients, but was also keen to take in other soldiers to “cure”. His focus was homosexuals and drug users. Commanding officers and chaplains were encouraged to refer “deviants” for “treatment”.

At first Dr Levin was convinced he could make heterosexuals out of gay patients, using electroconvulsive aversion therapy. Michael Smith, now a 46-year-old marketing manager in Johannesburg, was sent to ward 22 after Dr Levin forced him to admit he was homosexual in front of his parents. He was then an 18-year-old conscript.

“It was the first time they realised I was homosexual and they were horrified. Dr Levin told them he had a therapy that would ‘reorientate’ me, so I agreed to the treatment,” he said.

The treatment consisted of strapping electrodes to the upper arm with wires running to a dial calibrated from one to 10. Homosexual soldiers were shown pictures of a naked man and encouraged to fantasise, then the power was ratcheted up until the patient could take no more.

The subject was then shown an image of a naked woman.

“When you kind of reached the maximum point and then you’d say ‘No, no, no, I couldn’t stand it any more’, then he would say: ‘Now you must think about your girlfriend’, and all that sort of off-the-wall statements,” said Mr Smith.

“I was actually just completely freaked out and confused. It certainly didn’t do much for my impulses of attraction for other boys.”

Trudie Grobler, an intern psychologist on ward 22, saw a lesbian subjected to such severe shocks that her shoes flew off.

“It was traumatic. I could not believe her body could handle it,” she said.

Dr Levin believed the same treatment could also cure “drug addicts”, mostly men caught smoking marijuana. There were

also those who simply did not want to serve in the apartheid military. They were tagged as “disturbed”.

On arrival at ward 22, “patients” were stripped of their clothes and shoes and given brown pyjamas. The army said that would help to prevent escapes. Every new patient was put on Valium. The ward orderlies carried pistols.

Dr Levin also subjected his patients to narco-analysis or a “truth drug”, involving the slow injection of a barbiturate before the questioning began. Dr Levin does not deny its use.

Hard labour

“Narco-analysis was used, I give you that, but it was used in very isolated cases and only to help treat post-traumatic stress. Narco-analysis was used to help get victims to talk about the trauma they suffered,” he said.

But former patients say that gays and “drug addicts” were subjected to the treatment to see if they were really “cured”. Drug users considered habitual addicts were sent to a hard-labour farm.

Dr Levin, who became chief psychiatrist for the whole South African military, eventually concluded that aversion therapy was a failure and abandoned it in favour of other methods.

One gay soldier, Jean Erasmus, was chemically castrated by Dr Levin at Bloemfontein psychiatric hospital in 1980.

Before he committed suicide last year, Erasmus recorded a tape detailing the broader abuse of homosexuals in the army, including how he was forced by his officers to participate in the gang rape of Angolan women, and how other gay soldiers were given hormone drugs.

“I am quite convinced that quite a few murders of gay people took place which we will never know of, and it was covered up. When people got trigger happy, gays were often the brunt of the bullet.”

In practice, the army’s treatment of gays was confused. Many found themselves in de facto “gay battalions”, according to Mikki van Zyl, a researcher on the Aversion Project report.

“In Uppington, virtually the whole battalion was queer until some general decided this should be broken up. There was one in Grahamstown. There was another in Pretoria. For some of them, these were supportive environments,” she said.

Some men joined the army specifically to get a sex change operation. But others were pressured into surgery by military psychologists after other methods failed. The army carried out as many as 50 sex change operations a year.

Lesbians were also offered surgery - one woman is among those left partially altered after the programme was shut down.

The Aversion Project report argues that the doctors concerned broke international law.

“Health workers in the [military] were expected to be loyal first to the state and its ideologies. It meant that some doctors flagrantly ignored terms from the Geneva convention and Tokyo declaration, and certainly showed no accountability to the national professional councils, nor best current practices. The stage was set for human rights abuses of patients under the care of such doctors.”

Ms van Zyl says that while the army as an institution should be held accountable, Dr Levin has particular responsibility.

“He left a trail of experiments. He worked in environments where he had captive subjects and he abused them,” she said.

Dr Levin emigrated to Canada at about the time he was warned by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa that he would be named as an abuser of human rights.

Speaking to the Guardian from Canada, where he works at a teaching hospital, he said he left South Africa only because of the high crime rate, and denied the accusations against him.

“Nobody was given electric shock treatment by me. What we practised was aversion therapy. We caused slight, very slight, pain in the arm by contracting the muscles, using an electronic device,” he said.

“Nobody was held against his or her will. We did not keep human guinea pigs, like Russian communists; we only had patients who wanted to be cured and were there voluntarily.”

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