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Homosexual 'conversion' has psychiatrists in a tiff

By Valerie Richardson
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A proposal before the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to condemn treatment for homosexuals who seek to become heterosexual has ignited a backlash from therapists who say the organization is putting politics before medicine.

Sponsored by the society's Committee on Gay, Lesbian and Bisex-

ual Issues and approved by the Board of Trustees in December, the proposal states that the APA "does not endorse any psychiatric treatment which is based either upon a psychiatrist's assumption that homosexuality is a mental disorder or a psychiatrist's intent to change a person's sexual orientation."

The association's 200-member
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governing assembly is scheduled to vote on the resolution this weekend at its annual meeting at the Philadelphia Convention Center.

The resolution represents the APA's most serious attempt to date to denounce such treatment, known as reparative therapy, although the practice has been frowned on since the 27,000-member professional society took homosexuality off its list of mental disorders in 1973.

Previously, the APA's only formal policy on reparative therapy was a 1990 statement by the organization's medical director that homosexuals who seek to change their sexual preference "may be doing so because of social bias that has resulted in internalized homo-

phobia."

The latest resolution has come under fire from hundreds of psychiatrists who either practice or support reparative therapy, including the 300-member National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH) and the 750-member Committee of Concerned Psychoanalysts and Committee of Concerned Psychiatrists.

In a May 12 letter, leaders of the two committees say the resolution has no basis in clinical research and would deprive thousands of homosexuals of voluntarily sought treatment. The proposal would also violate the First Amendment and free-trade rights of psychiatrists, say opponents, who add that they might challenge the resolution in court if it passes.

Dr. Charles Socarides, president of NARTH, said he fears the proposal will discredit reparative

therapy to the point that psychiatrists will be afraid to conduct research on it or to write or speak about it. Those who continue to practice reparative therapy could eventually be forced out of the organization, he said.

"It represents a huge nationwide gag order," said Dr. Socarides, a professor of clinical psychiatry at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. "It certainly diminishes anyone's ardor to treat a homosexual if he thinks he's going to be denounced. It also creates resistance for homosexuals to seek help."

He and other advocates of reparative therapy blame the resolution on what they describe as a powerful faction within the APA bent on advancing a "gay agenda" at the expense of science. In 1992, an internal move to declare reparative therapy "unethical" was blocked only after NARTH law-

yers intervened, said Dr. Socarides.

Dr. Rochelle Klinger, chairman of the APA's Committee on Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Issues, denied the panel was trying to discredit individual psychiatrists. She said the main problem with reparative therapy is that it simply doesn't work and can in fact prove destructive.

"The aim is to clarify the scientific evidence against the efficacy and safety of reparative therapy, not to get anyone kicked out," said Dr. Klinger, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.

She said the board toned down the committee's original version, which had called for the APA to "reject the practice of scientific treatment based upon the assumption that homosexuality is a medical disorder." The board also added a sentence saying psychi-

atrists should remain "respectful" of their patients' "objectives for treatment."

"I'm not saying that they [psychiatrists] shouldn't respect their patients' wishes, but at times they may need to redefine their wishes," Dr. Klinger said.

She cited the example of a patient who had tried for 20 years to change his orientation from homosexual to heterosexual without success. Eventually, she told him that his depression may have stemmed not from his homosexuality but from his desire to change it.

"I'm not sure all the therapy in the world was going to change him," Dr. Klinger said.

The APA does not keep figures on those who seek reparative therapy, but Dr. Socarides estimated that "thousands" of homosexuals undergo such treatment each year. Exodus, a Christian-based repara-

tive therapy program, receives more than 100,000 inquiries each year, with about 6,000 homosexuals seeking treatment at the program's 125 branches.

Anthony Falzarado, executive director of the District's Exodus program, Transformation, says he was homosexual for nine years before seeking help in 1982. Today, he says, he has been happily married for 10 years and has two daughters.

"If I didn't get therapy, I would have been dead from AIDS. I was a sexual addict living in New York and Boston with over 400 partners," Mr. Falzarado said. "I can say definitively that I would have been infected."

Mr. Falzarado said about 100 former homosexuals plan to picket outside the Philadelphia meeting this weekend. Among the signs will be some reading, "APA, Not the Gay-PA," he said.