

# Homosexuality

by Peter Saunders

Debating issues of sexuality is a political minefield, be it discussing gender differences or asking questions of people's sexual orientation. As a result there are few serious studies currently under way assessing the causes and consequences of gay lifestyles. Anyone interested in informed debate, must look at all available data as objectively as possible. Christians must also ask how biblical teaching should influence lifestyle choices.

The past decade has seen a growing acceptance of homosexuality and same-sex relationships as part of a range of patterns of behaviour within our society.

Psychologists talk about a spectrum of sexual orientation. At one extreme there are people who have never had a homosexual thought in their lives, while at the other are people who feel no arousal towards members of the opposite sex.

Homosexuality may be defined as the preferential erotic attraction to people of the same sex. But putting this definition into practice is not simple, because sexual orientation does not always correlate with sexual behaviour and some people with homosexual orientations may never engage in homosexual activity. Conversely, under extreme situations, such as in prisons or during wartime, people with heterosexual orientation may participate in sexual acts with those of the same sex. The usual pattern, however, is that sexual orientation will have a major bearing on sexual expression.

The issue of homosexuality invites Christians to understand people who are often misunderstood. But forming well-founded opinions also involves keeping up to date with contemporary scientific and social research.

## Underlying causes

Even asking whether there are underlying causes of homosexuality raises criticism as the very question is politically incorrect. The result, as one psychiatrist put it, is that 'This is an area, *par excellence*, where scientific objectivity has little chance of survival.'<sup>1</sup>

The problem is clearly displayed in a 2002 review of the current state of biomedical research on homosexuality. This concluded that so far the causes of homosexuality are unknown, that sexual orientation is likely to be influenced by both biological and social features and that the area could be studied. The review then argued that research into the causes of homosexuality would be unethical and should not occur.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently little work has been carried out recently. A 1997 review of the most likely causes of homosexuality concluded that the scientific study of sexual orientation is, at best, still in its infancy.<sup>3</sup>

## Hormonal influences

Some commentators once suggested that homosexuals were hormonally

different to heterosexuals. This idea was abandoned when sensitive hormone assays showed that there were no consistent differences.<sup>4</sup>

Prenatal hormonal exposure to sex hormones does influence brain development, giving rise to the possibility that it could affect sexual orientation. Female rats exposed to masculinising androgen hormones, and male rats that are castrated at birth, both show sexual behaviour characteristic of the opposite sex.<sup>5</sup>

But extrapolating this to humans is not simple, because unlike the reflex driven behaviour of rodents, human sexual behaviour is influenced by complex conscious decision-making. If the prenatal hormone hypothesis is correct, studies should find androgen level disorders in homo-sexuals. Extensive reviews of the literature suggest this is not the case.<sup>6</sup>

## Brain structure

Some small studies have reported possible correlations between brain structure and sexual orientation, as well as suggesting that homosexual men and women have an increased level of left-handedness. One study reported that an area of the hypothalamus was smaller in women and homosexual men than in

heterosexual men,<sup>7</sup> but many commentators have criticised the methods used in the study.<sup>6</sup>

There have been some suggestions that a feature in the brain called the anterior commissure varies in size between heterosexuals and homosexuals. However a 2002 review of the data found that the results of different studies conflicted, and there was no evidence of this variation.<sup>8</sup>

## Genetics

While genes clearly have some bearing on behaviour, in the case of homosexuality, the evidence suggests that the genetic influence is only one factor.

There was considerable media interest in 1993, when scientists claimed that variation in a region on the X chromosome (Xq28) was linked to male homosexual orientation.<sup>9</sup> This study has since met with criticism<sup>10</sup> and few people now give much weight to its evidence.

Twin studies are another way of looking for genetic influences. The most powerful studies look at identical twins who have been separated at birth. A 1986 study of four female and two male pairs concluded that genetic factors were hard to deny, but the numbers of subjects was too small to draw any meaningful conclusions.<sup>11</sup> Also many identical twins have differing sexual orientations.

A 1995 review of the genetic data pointed out that to be valid a study must meet five criteria. It must have:

1. Valid and precise measures of individual differences
2. Appropriate methods to determine biological relationships
3. Randomly selected subjects
4. Large enough groups of subjects
5. Correctly understood the underlying genetics.

Its conclusion? 'To date, all studies of the genetic basis of sexual orientation of men and women have failed to meet one or more of any of the above criteria.'<sup>12</sup> Since then, a study of approximately 3,000 randomly picked people estimated the heritability of male homosexuality in a range of 0.28-0.65.<sup>13</sup>

## Environmental factors

There is evidence that the culture in which a person grows can influence their behaviour. At one extreme, in some cultures homosexuality is so uncommon that their language has no word to describe it.<sup>1</sup>

Cambridge psychologist Elizabeth Moberly, suggests that homosexual orientation develops in response to a deficit in early bonding with the same-sex parent. If the child feels unaccepted in the pre-adolescent phase, he or she may look for affirmation in relationships with the same sex once sexual maturity has been reached.<sup>14</sup> There are clearly individuals from such backgrounds who do not develop a homosexual orientation, and others from different backgrounds who do.

Some counsellors find that the majority of male homosexuals that they see identify with this lack of intimate bonding with their fathers or any other male role model.<sup>15</sup>

A study of nearly 35,000 adolescents showed that sexual orientation is not fixed at an early age.<sup>16</sup> In fact, about a quarter of the 12-year-olds were unsure of their orientation. This steadily declined to about 5% of 18-year-olds. The authors noted that the observed relationship between sexuality and religiosity, ethnicity, and socio-economic status provided further evidence of social influences on perceived sexual identity.

## Changing Perceptions

Public and medical reaction to homosexuality has changed dramatically. In the United Kingdom, until 1967 homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private was a criminal offence at any age. In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of sexual disorders. Later, the British Medical Association (BMA) Council joined in calls for the lowering of the

age of homosexual consent, and in 2000 parliament lowered the age at which a person could legally consent to anal sex for heterosexual or homosexual couples from 18 to 16.<sup>17</sup>

Now that it has become 'politically correct' to view homosexual orientation as a normal variant, doctors who express alternative viewpoints are frequently labelled as 'homophobic' or 'heterosexist'.

There has also been a concerted effort to present homosexual orientation as one of many normal biological variants. This has diverted attention away from what homosexual sex involves, and makes homosexuality a topic of everyday conversation. This change of opinion makes it difficult to evaluate the facts objectively, and many people are afraid to contradict it for fear of the wrath of the 'new' establishment.

## Incidence of homosexuality

The true incidence of homosexuality is much lower than generally believed. The commonly quoted figure of ten percent comes from the 1948 Kinsey Report.<sup>18</sup> This was based on a poorly designed study of a non-randomly selected group, 25% of whom were (or had been) prison inmates. A 1994 British sex survey showed that only one in 90 people had had a homosexual partner in the previous year.<sup>19</sup> Research published in 2001 indicated that 2.6% of both men and women reported homosexual partnerships.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the popular media image of homosexual monogamy, several large studies reveal that less than ten percent of homosexual men or women have ever experienced a relationship of greater than ten years duration.<sup>21</sup> In one large early study, 74% of male homosexuals reported having more than one hundred partners in a lifetime, and 28% more than 1,000; 75% reported that over half of their partners were strangers. The figures for female homosexuals are substantially lower, but still

significantly higher than those for married heterosexuals.<sup>22</sup>

## Facing up to real dangers

It is unwise and dishonest to ignore the fact that people living homosexual lifestyles are at greater risks of various forms of injuries than other members of the public. This is especially the case for homosexual men.

### High-risk sex

The most common high-risk sexual behaviours include oral-genital contact, mutual masturbation of the penis and anus and anal intercourse. While the vagina and the muscles within a woman's pelvis are well-designed for sexual intercourse, this is not the case for the anatomy of the anus and rectum. Anal sex can lead to ulcers, inflammation, tearing of the muscles around the anus, and disruption in the rectum. This can cause incontinence and increase the risk of getting an infection.

Consequently male homosexuals have a much higher incidence of sexually-related disease, regardless of whether or not condoms are used. These include syphilis, shigella, salmonella, amoebiasis, giardiasis, chlamydia, gonorrhoea, campylobacter, and scabies and viral infections such as, herpes, hepatitis A and B and HIV.<sup>23</sup> Many sexually transmitted infectious agents, including human papillomavirus, are also strongly linked to anal cancer.<sup>24</sup> Consistently using condoms can reduce the risk, but condoms do not protect against physical damage.

### Substance abuse

Recreational drug use is one factor responsible for the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases, and substance misuse appears to be higher among homosexual men than in a comparable heterosexual male group.<sup>25</sup>

Members of the gay community

often say that these differences in behaviour are simply a response to discrimination by society against homosexuals in general, but much of this evidence comes from communities where homosexual behaviour is readily accepted.

### Mental illness

Multiple partners, unsafe sexual practices and substance abuse are more common in homosexuals, and leave homosexuals at risk of psychiatric conditions.<sup>26</sup>

Suicidal tendencies also increase in gay and lesbian young people.<sup>27</sup> Male homosexuals are three times more likely to have seriously contemplated or attempted suicide, and are twelve times more likely to have had a major depressive disorder than their heterosexual counterparts.<sup>28</sup>

## Biblical principles to follow

Over the last two decades the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement has argued that it is entirely compatible with the Christian faith not only to love a person of the same sex but also to express that love sexually.<sup>28</sup> Most Christians, however, believe that the supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct must be God's word. The LGCM view of homosexuality actually goes against the teaching of the Bible.

Throughout Scripture, sexual intercourse is seen as a gift from God to be enjoyed, but only in the context of a lifelong heterosexual marriage relationship. Man and woman become 'one flesh'.<sup>29</sup> The seriousness with which God views sexual behaviour outside marriage is dramatically illustrated in the Old Testament. Adultery resulted in the death penalty for both partners.<sup>30</sup> Those who took part in premarital sex were obliged to marry, but if loss of virginity was discovered in a woman by her husband at the time of marriage she was also stoned to death.<sup>31</sup>

Old Testament verses give specific directives: 'Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable'<sup>32</sup> and 'If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of have done what is detestable. They must be put to death'.<sup>33</sup> Homosexual practice is one of the reasons given for the destruction of Sodom.<sup>34</sup>

The severity of Old Testament penalties may surprise us, and Jesus' death paying the price for all sins now makes them redundant. They do, however, serve to remind us of two things. God has the right both to tell us how we ought to live and to call us to account for the way we do.

New Testament teaching is even more demanding, as it shows us the true spirit of Old Testament Law. Jesus explains that not only is sexual intercourse outside marriage wrong, but even impure thoughts are sin.<sup>35</sup> The prohibitions against adultery and premarital sex are upheld and homosexual behaviour is specifically ruled out on three occasions.<sup>36</sup>

## Practical Christian responses

Christians who recognise that they have a homosexual orientation are more susceptible to temptation in this area than are others. This cannot however be used as an excuse for homosexual acts, which the Bible says are wrong. There is a difference between temptation and sin.

The way of escape is to recognise that Jesus, who was 'tempted in every way just as we are', lives in them by his Spirit. All Christians are promised his strength to endure temptation. All temptation can be resisted<sup>37</sup> and if we do fall we have the confidence that if we confess our sin he will forgive us and cleanse us.<sup>38</sup> This cannot, of course, be used as an excuse for continuing in sin.

Christians with a heterosexual orientation need to be patient and understanding towards Christians who don't. While urging them to refrain from homosexual acts they

need also to be forgiving.<sup>39</sup> They must also watch themselves, knowing that God views any sexual sin (even lust) as equally wrong.

Christians must not victimise or abuse non-Christians who are practising homosexuals, but instead seek to understand them and treat them with love and respect, while not affirming their lifestyle choices.

To the gay rights lobby, when Christians of homosexual orientation resist the temptation to take part in a homosexual acts, they are 'living a lie'. But from a biblical perspective they are exhibiting spiritual self-control.

## Changing orientation

Many believe that sexual orientation is as unchangeable as eye colour or handedness. But one five year follow-up of sixty-seven exclusively homosexual men and women, reported that 65% changed their sexual orientation after behaviour therapy.<sup>40</sup> Change happens most readily when there is a desire to change, a belief that change is possible and an environment of love and acceptance.

A Christian has the power of the Holy Spirit working in his or her life, making the possibility of change greater. However, change does not always occur. Ongoing temptation may have to be lived with and celibacy may be the only option. A person doesn't have to have sexual intercourse to be fully human. Jesus lived the most fully human life and yet

never married nor had sex, and the Apostle Paul commends the single life as one of high calling for a Christian, freeing him (or her) to serve God in a special way.<sup>41</sup>

## Christ's model for living

There is no better model for a Christian response than when Jesus forgave a woman caught in adultery, but told her not to sin again.<sup>42</sup> Christians must avoid hypocrisy and recognise that all people face sexual temptations. Indeed, most people sin sexually, at least in their minds if not in action, so we must not judge or condemn. Christians should explain the biblical position, warn of the dangers of a homosexual lifestyle, and offer support and encouragement to change. Their efforts may be rejected, but this does not lessen the obligations.

Christian initiatives in this area, such as the True Freedom Trust<sup>43</sup>, which seeks to help Christians with homosexual orientation, or Aids Care Education and Training<sup>44</sup>, which provides compassionate care for AIDS sufferers, are good examples of what can be done.

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<sup>28</sup> www.lgcm.org.uk

<sup>29</sup> Genesis 2:24

<sup>30</sup> Deuteronomy 22:22

<sup>31</sup> Deuteronomy 22:20-21

<sup>32</sup> Leviticus 18:22

<sup>33</sup> Leviticus 20:13

<sup>34</sup> Genesis 19:1-29

<sup>35</sup> Matthew 5:27-28

<sup>36</sup> Romans 1:24-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:8-11

<sup>37</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:13

<sup>38</sup> 1 John 1:9

<sup>39</sup> Luke 1:3

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<sup>41</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:22-35

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