

The Right to Define Oneself

By Frank York

"For me," said one interview subject, "having one leg improves my own sexual image. It feels 'right,' the way I should always have been, and for some reason, in line with what I think my body ought to have been like."

In April, 2004, British public health officials expressed concern over the growing numbers of homosexual males who are using the Internet to participate in "barebacking" parties. These are sex orgies which include both HIV-infected and non-infected homosexuals who seek to become HIV infected. These individuals are known as "bug chasers," and the HIV-infected person who wishes to infect others is known as a "gift giver." The "gift" is HIV infection and eventual death.

The Internet thus serves as a networking tool for individuals who suffer from the same pathological conditions. They create networks that are designed to affirm each other.

Similarly, many individuals who suffer from the Gender Identity Disorder known as transvestic fetishism, are establishing Internet support groups to reinforce a condition that the DSM-IV still considers to be a mental illness. The transgender movement is gaining momentum as a result of the Internet's ability to connect and emotionally support people with the same pathologies.

Defining Oneself —as Legless

In 2000, bioethicist Carl Elliott published "A New Way To Be Mad," in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Elliott's essay describes yet a new distortion: how individuals with the desire to have their arms or legs amputated are finding support groups online to reinforce these unfortunate desires.

According to Elliott, it was Dr. John Money, formerly at Johns Hopkins University who coined the term "apotemnophilia," to describe individuals who are fascinated by the idea of having their limbs cut off. Money described those who are sexually attracted to amputees as suffering from "acrotomophilia."

Elliott notes that during his research on the extent of individuals suffering from apotemnophilia, he discovered that

very little had been written about this condition in professional journals. However, he found a large network of individuals on the Net who described themselves as "devotees," (acrotomophiles) or "wannabes," (apotemnophiles).

According to Elliott, "By all accounts, the Internet has been revolutionary for wannabes. I can see why. It took me months to track down even a handful of scientific articles on the desire for amputation. It took about ten seconds to find dozens of Web sites devoted to the topic. Every one of the wannabes and devotees I have talked with about the Internet says that it has changed everything for them."

According to one woman, "The Internet was, for me, a validation experience." She said the Internet provided her with the information she needed to lose her legs.

The wannabes Elliott talked to discussed their need to have their limbs removed because they believed they were incomplete persons with their arms or legs. One amputee told Elliott, "For me having one leg improves my own sexual image. It feels 'right,' the way I should always have been and for some reason in line with what I think my body ought to have been like."

Elliott notes that the "comparison of limb amputation to sex reassignment surgery comes up repeatedly in discussions of ampotemnophilia, among patients and clinicians."

He writes: "Many wannabes are convinced that amputation is the only possible solution to their problems, yet they have never seen a psychiatrist or a psychologist, have never tried medication, have never read a scientific paper about their problems. More than a few of them have never ever spoken face to face with another human being about their desires. All they have is the Internet, and their own trouble lives, as the place where those two things intersect." ■

No Balance Permitted in Message to Schools?

"Ex-gay messages have no place in our nation's public schools. A line has been drawn. There is no 'other side' when you're talking about lesbian, gay and bisexual students."

— "Kevin Jennings of GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) in a GLSEN publication. GLSEN says that its goal is to "extend to incorporating homosexual concepts into all curriculum."