

NARTH's President-Elect Chairs Symposium At APA Convention In San Francisco

By Daniel Byrne, Ph.D.

A symposium sponsored by Division 1 (Society for General Psychology) was held at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association in San Francisco on August 20. Though relegated by APA to a Monday-morning slot, the gathering was well attended -- reflecting substantial interest both in the topic and in the presenters.

The symposium, "Reforming APA Advocacy," was chaired by the President-Elect of NARTH, A. Dean Byrd, Ph.D, MBA, MPH.

Presenters included Drs. Nicholas Cummings and Frank Farley - both former APA presidents -- and Dr. Rogers Wright, a former member of APA's Board of Directors. Not only were these esteemed participants once APA insiders, but their *curriculum vitae* classify them as among the most influential leaders in psychology today.

Dr. Cummings and Dr. Wright are also former keynote speakers at NARTH Conferences.

Summarizing his impression of the symposium, NARTH Scientific Advisory Board member Dr. Christopher Rosik said: "I believe that Cummings, Wright and Farley have a wealth of insight into the dysfunction currently existing in the APA, as well as solid ideas on how to remedy the problems. They all seem to converge on the notion of returning the vote back to the membership, rather than letting the Council decide social-policy matters."

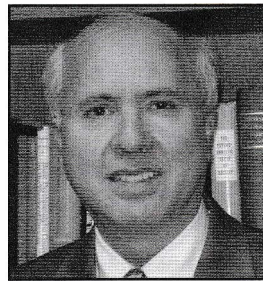
Dr. Byrd opened the symposium by citing his motivation for proposing it: his admiration for a new book edited by Wright and Cummings, *Destructive Trends in Mental Health*.

The book, reviewed by Dr. Byrd (for the NARTH web site) describes it as perhaps the most important critique of the mental health profession during this decade.

Political Agendas Controlling Science

Wright and Cummings, along with an Academy-Award roster of prominent mental health professionals, conclude that "psychology, psychiatry, and social work have been captured by an ultra-liberal agenda." "Misguided political correctness tethers our intellects," they observe, and "if psychology is to soar like an eagle, it needs both a left wing and a right wing."

Chapter after chapter in this well-written book documents how APA has again and again taken position statements and issued resolutions without adequate scientific data or demonstrable clinical experience.



A. Dean Byrd, Ph.D.

Wright cites the issue of homosexuality as illustrative of how political correctness and a narrow definition of "diversity" have dominated APA. Wright notes:

"In the current climate, it is inevitable that conflict arises among the various subgroups in the marketplace. For example, gay groups within APA have repeatedly tried to persuade the association to adopt ethical standards that prohibit therapists from offering psychotherapeutic services designed to ameliorate 'gayness,' on the basis that such efforts are unsuccessful and harmful to the consumer. Psychologists who do not agree with this premise are termed homophobic. Such efforts are especially troubling because they abrogate the patient's right to choose the therapist and determine the therapeutic goals. They also deny the reality of data demonstrating that psychotherapy can be effective in changing sexual preference in patients who have a desire to do so."

Former APA President Decries APA's Activism

The spirited presentation by Dr. Cummings began with the following introductory comment: "In his President's Column in the Monitor on Psychology (October 2006), APA President Gerald Koocher declared, 'Psychological science is not politically correct.' Coming after almost three decades of politically correct APA proclamations, most [of which] are gratuitous and devoid of scientific verification -- with some even silly -- it caused me to reminisce about another president...that one of the United States. It was Richard Nixon who declared on TV at the height of the Watergate Scandal, 'I am not a crook.' Even though they are light years apart in the level of importance to society, there is an escapable similarity in the absurdity of both statements in the face of the existing facts."

In his eloquent style, Dr. Cummings provided a case for the continuing erosion of psychological science by APA, focusing on the "dozens of proclamations, ranging from boxing, to Zionism, to the silliest of all -- the naming of athletic-team mascots -- all without one shred of scientific evidence."

"In the meantime," Dr. Cummings noted, "dire social problems persist and even increase as psychology, the science that should be addressing these, has its hands tied by political correctness. 'PC' has a chilling effect on scientific inquiry, making taboo the investigation of certain problems that should be the province of psychology.... APA proclamations have the effect of ending debate -- carving into stone ignorance and lack of scientific understanding."

Demoralization Of The APA Membership

Of APA membership, Dr. Cummings concluded, "A large number who remain in the APA are demoralized and detached, maintaining their membership because they need the benefits such as malpractice insurance...Much of the membership is essentially disenfranchised, getting to vote only for the president, while divisions and their sub-divisions elect the Council of Representatives, the Board of Directors, and control the numerous committee and task force appointments. The APA is a bloated bureaucracy run by an oligarchy of about 200 who recycle themselves through various offices in a kind of musical chairs."

Dr. Cummings fears that "Unless psychology alters this nihilistic course, it will eventually be totally discredited."

Last year, Dr. Cummings proposed a governance overhaul that was strongly endorsed by APA past-president Dr. Patrick DeLeon. The proposal called for the removal of control of the APA from the divisions and returning control to the membership based on a one-member, one-vote democratic principle for all the offices within APA. Dr. Cummings predicted that his proposal would be DOA -- dead on arrival. "It was worse," Dr. Cummings noted. "My proposal was stillborn."

Too Late For Reform?

"Without reform, psychology will continue to decline," noted Dr. Cummings. He concluded that unless something is done soon, "it will be too late for reform, and will require desperation."

Dr. Wright's presentation began by describing his dilemma. After more than 50 years of active membership and substantial commitment, he admitted that he was agonizing about resigning from the membership of APA.

Cited as the cause for such drastic consideration were two reasons:

1. APA's "abuse of its public stature in the interest of advancing controversial social and/or political goals," and
2. The "fecklessness" of APA's recent leadership.

Included in Dr. Wright's paper were grave concerns about APA's continued violation of the Leona Tyler Principle, an accepted position adopted by the Council of Representatives.

The principle forbids APA from taking positions or issuing proclamations where there is inadequate science and/or demonstrable clinical experience. (This principle does not prevent any psychologist from taking a position or advocating for particular issues either individually, or in groups. However, when there is an absence of data derived from science or practice, APA as a group must remain silent.)

Banning Therapy Would Be Unethical

Citing APA's previous attempt to ban psychotherapy aimed at reducing unwanted homosexuality, Wright concluded that this effort was "ill-advised," noting that "the causation of homosexuality remains unknown," and "success/failure rates of sexual-identity change as a function of psychotherapy are equally unknown, (perhaps currently unknowable)," and suggesting that the correct application of the Leona Tyler Principle would have found any consideration of this anti-therapy proposal "out of order" from the very outset.

Dr. Farley's response to the Cummings and Wright papers was equally spirited. As a more recent APA president, Dr. Farley provided additional data supporting the "growing chorus in APA demanding reform" of APA's political advocacy. He expressed concern that APA has become "a politically correct profession, with crowd control by the thought police."

Persistent Ideological Bias

Dr. Farley noted the corrosive effects of sociopolitical ideologies, the presence of liberal biases, APA's politicization, and its inappropriate involvement in public and political issues. The audience response to the symposium was overwhelmingly positive, with many participants citing similar concerns.

Longtime APA member Dr. Norma Hart echoed those concerns about APA's preoccupation with political correctness, and demonstrated the corrosive effects on psychology of adherence to such "correctness."

Dr. Steve Smith concluded that a "return to the 'Tyler Principle' is sound and important to pursue."

Of the potential ban on providing psychological care for those with unwanted homosexual attractions, Dr. Smith declared, "I'm persuaded that there is no compelling scientific reason to ban work with homosexual persons who want to make a change in orientation."

What was clear from the response to this symposium is that there is a widening effort from APA members for more input into the resolutions and position statements made by APA. There was also a clear mandate to re-institute the Tyler Principle as a way of preventing special interest groups from masquerading activism as science, as well as a demand for a more democratic form of governance.

Perhaps the time has come for grassroots efforts to demand reform in APA advocacy -- *now*.

