

## Spitzer Declines NARTH's Sigmund Freud Award — *Cites Socio-Political Differences with NARTH*

By A. Dean Byrd, Ph.D., M.B.A., M.P.H.

As most NARTH members know, Dr. Robert L. Spitzer recently published a study in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. From his research, Dr. Spitzer concluded that some gay men and lesbians are not only able to change self-identity, but are able to modify core features of sexual orientation, including fantasies.

Dr. Spitzer was subjected to many complaints and accusations. Perhaps the worst attack that I have seen was in a recent edition of the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy*. He was described in this journal as "...an over-the-hill stage horse galloping toward the limelight, or a court jester hoodwinked by a scheming religious right." Can you imagine any professional journal permitting such a character assassination?

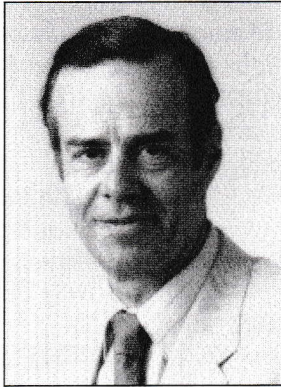
While my personal association with Dr. Spitzer has been relatively brief, may I share a few impressions? I had the privilege of meeting with him when he began his study. He was a mild-mannered man who seemed reasonable and open to other views. I was impressed with his genuineness and sincerity. Although none of us are completely immune from the politics of our time, I sensed that he was willing to let science, not activism, guide his research.

In spite of the politics of intimidation and the name-calling that followed his research, Dr. Spitzer found a prestigious, peer-reviewed journal to publish his work.

Then most recently, when the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy* attempted to "trash" both Dr. Spitzer personally as well as his study, the opposite was actually achieved. Even some of my gay colleagues were offended by the *Journal's* mean-spiritedness. I, along with them, take comfort in the belief that most professionals will be able to glean for themselves the differences between legitimate scientific criticisms and political rhetoric. In this instance, the attacks on the messenger rather than the message indicate a serious dearth of plausible counter-arguments.

Dr. Spitzer noted that "science progresses by asking interesting questions, not by avoiding questions whose answers might not be helpful in achieving a political agenda." It is because of Dr. Spitzer's contribution to science, not his political views, that NARTH determined that he should be offered our annual Sigmund Freud Award.

However, interestingly enough, Dr. Spitzer has cited *politi-*



Robert L. Spitzer, M.D.

*cal reasons* why he is unable to accept the award — he has told us that his differences with NARTH on socio-political positions such as gay marriage, gay adoption, and gays in the military prevent him from accepting NARTH's award.

Is it not ironic, however, that NARTH — because it is a scientific organization — has in fact taken no official positions on gay marriage, gay adoptions, and gays in the military?

This is an example of how socio-political differences are actually at the heart of the debate, and Bob Spitzer's position is a stark reminder of this fact. This debate is really a debate on diversity: how differing worldviews can co-exist within the social sciences.

Had Dr. Spitzer elected to accept the NARTH award, he would have made a statement for diversity, nothing else: he would have been acknowledging that reasonable people can hold differing views on important social issues.

I speak at a forum every week where differing worldviews are valued: I teach in a medical school which values real diversity. My students are encouraged to develop their worldviews in a way that integrates the social science research and/or their beliefs—but their views must be informed by some respected body of knowledge.

So I must admit that I am disappointed at Bob's response to the NARTH award. I suppose that it takes courage to either accept or decline an award from NARTH. However, my respect for him has not diminished—I suppose he is simply tired of being politically incorrect, and tired of the harassment and the intimidation. Or perhaps — has he himself become unable to separate his politics from science?

Nonetheless, Robert Spitzer has made a significant contribution to the literature, and has brought legitimacy to those who struggle with unwanted homosexual attractions. He has sent a clear message to a minority within a minority: ex-gays, and that clear message is "You do exist."

How did Bob Spitzer respond to my critique? "Very fair," he concluded to me in an e-mail. I invite members of NARTH to let Robert L. Spitzer know of your appreciation for his contribution to science. His email address is: RLS8@Columbia.edu. ■