

Firsthand: My Experience Attending the American Psychiatric Association Panel Discussion

By Joseph Nicolosi, Ph.D.

Can gays change sexual orientation? The psychiatric establishment used to believe the answer to that question was a qualified "yes." But in recent years, influential gay activists within the profession have succeeded in shifting that prevailing wisdom, and many in our profession now say "no."

So when Bob Spitzer told us a couple of years ago that he was interested in reopening this controversial question, NARTH was eager to cooperate.

Last year, NARTH published a study of over 800 people who had made a substantial degree of change in their sexuality. The study was published in a peer-reviewed journal, and announced with a press release. But to our great disappointment, only a few news outlets picked up the story.

Then when Dr. Spitzer told us he was undertaking his *own* study, we knew *this* study would be news. Spitzer was a hero in the gay community in 1973, and he was a highly regarded researcher with no political axe to grind and no particular position of advocacy. NARTH got busy locating subjects that could fit Spitzer's stringent criteria. He was scheduled to announce his study results at the May 9th Psychiatric Association Convention in New Orleans.

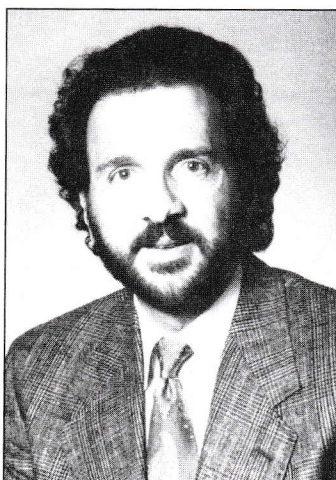
With great care, we put together a press release that would be balanced and scientifically accurate, and then arranged for it to be released to all the major world news outlets.

I flew to New Orleans to be at the conference when Spitzer made his presentation, which we knew could be historic. Beforehand, I had lunch with Dr. Spitzer and another panelist, Mark Yarhouse. Spitzer, who was clearly nervous about his upcoming ordeal, told me he anticipated some stiff opposition.

Walking in to the A.P.A. conference room in New Orleans, I had the distinct feeling he would be right. Ex-gays John Paulk and Mike Haley of Focus on the Family had also flown in, and we felt like a beleaguered minority. Wanting to be sure I would have a chance to get to the microphone to support Spitzer during the question-and-answer session, I got to the room early and sat down in the front row.

The room, which could hold perhaps 200 people, was full to the limit. Spitzer gave his presentation to an outward-

ly respectful audience, all intently listening and focused, while security personnel circulated throughout the room to make sure each person in the audience had a press pass or a convention ticket.



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The most caustic and provocative speaker was psychiatrist Jack Drescher, who singled out NARTH for specific criticism. Dr. Drescher is Deputy Representative of the American Psychiatric Association's Caucus of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Psychiatrists, and has long been an outspoken and influential opponent of efforts to change sexual orientation—calling reparative therapy "the laetrile of the mental-health profession." Drescher quoted a number of passages from the *NARTH Bulletin*, putting them in a context that implied that NARTH is engaged in a political battle to take away the civil rights of gays. His tone was accusatory and strident.

Psychologist Marshall Forstein also spoke for the opposition, referring specifically to my own published work and professional position as being "homophobic." He equated the gay movement with the movement for racial equity, and compared opposition to gay activism with the Crusades.

Psychologists Ariel Shidlo and Michael Schroeder made a presentation of their own study, which had advertised in the gay press seeking people who felt they had been damaged by reparative therapy. Their study was funded by a major backer of many gay causes, the H. van Ameringen Foundation, and it was conducted in association with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF).

A great irony struck me: earlier, NARTH's *own* study was dismissed by critics because we are a scientific group which advocates for people who seek change. Yet here was a study conducted by two gay-activist researchers—funded by a well-known gay-supportive foundation—which had sought subjects through gay publications—and which was conducted in cooperation with a gay advocacy group that stridently *opposes* all efforts at change!

Yet the gay press apparently saw no irony in their public denunciation of the Spitzer study, which they had dismissed on the grounds that Spitzer's subjects had been recruited from "anti-gay groups such as Exodus and NARTH."

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And when the press—especially the gay press—reported on the Shidlo study of dissatisfied former clients, it was typically implied that the researchers had sought a *representative* sample of strugglers—which would mean that the majority of former reparative therapy clients believed they had been harmed.

Despite their effort to find victims of harm, a small number of individuals responded to tell the investigators that they instead had been helped, and their response was included in the study. (The Shidlo-Schroeder study will be discussed in the next *NARTH Bulletin*.)

Next at the A.P.A. meeting, a particularly thoughtful discussion was initiated by Lawrence Appelbaum, M.D., the author of a paper on ethical guidelines for therapy which also could be applied to the treatment of homosexuality (a topic also to be discussed in the next *Bulletin*.)

Psychologist Mark Yarhouse gave a thoughtful presentation which challenged the assumption that people cannot change, and also provided a strong ethical defense for the right to treatment.

As soon as the question-and-answer session began, I was the first person to reach the microphone. After hearing so much rhetoric against NARTH from the gay activist panelists, I was determined to speak up.

I introduced myself as NARTH's president, to which the audience responded with what seemed to me an audible gasp. I challenged Drescher's attacking tone, and offered to debate him point-by-point either publicly or privately on his charge that NARTH is working to take away gay civil rights and to criminalize same-sex acts. I clarified that our mission is to support strugglers, not to crusade in support of anti-sodomy laws.

I don't think the audience quite knew what to make of the Spitzer presentation. The response was relatively reserved, and it was not until the story reached the media later that day that there was a strong outcry from the gay community. (One news story in the gay press was entitled "The Doc Who Went Over to the Dark Side.")

Immediately, the mainstream media snatched up the story. Spitzer gave interviews to Associated Press, Reuters, *The Washington Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, many television and radio producers, and he appeared on Good Morning America. NARTH member Richard Cohen made an appearance on the Fox News show, "The O'Reilly Factor," and the study was vigorously debated on "Hardball with Chris Matthews," CNN, CBS, and BBC.

NARTH members in Germany and New Zealand told us they heard the story from their own media outlets!

Back at the NARTH office, dozens of media calls began to flood the phone lines. NARTH Vice President Dean Byrd graciously gave up two long and exhausting days to respond to the media frenzy from his own office in Utah, just after he arrived home after representing our position at a conference on the family in France. With members of the press logging on to our website for background on the Spitzer story, we had 10,000 extra web visitors during one frenzied three-day period.

It was an exhausting time for every one of us. But the Spitzer study represents a groundbreaking new opening for those of us interested in answering the essential and timely question, "Can sexuality be changed?" We know it can; we have seen it happen. ■