

7 February 2014

Committee on the Health Care Complaints Commission
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Committee

Inquiry into the promotion of false or misleading health-related information or practices

I am sending you this submission because of my extensive experience in the area of ex-gay/reparative/conversion (henceforth referred to as SOCE – Sexual Orientation Change Efforts) 'therapies' both in Australia and also overseas since 2000. The attached bio will give you an idea of how extensive this has been ([attachment No.1](#)).

Personal background

The realisation that I was attracted to the same sex in my mid teens (1967) was extremely disturbing considering that at that time homosexuals were imprisoned and mental health professionals believed they could be cured using methods such as aversion therapy, shock treatment and lobotomies. The realisation that I could become 'one of those' created great internal conflict, depression and suicidal thoughts. Two things I knew from this was that I had to keep it a secret and that I had to do everything possible to change and become heterosexual.

During my final year at High School, after attempting suicide, I secretly attended sessions with a psychiatrist in order to find the cause of my homosexuality and eventually be cured. I thought I would overcome my attraction to the same sex but of course I didn't. During the school holidays I became a born again Christian believing that I would find forgiveness, God's power to overcome my 'sin' and the miracle I hoped and prayed for daily; that I would become straight/normal.

For the next 22 years I did everything possible to change. Not only did I pray constantly I went through exorcisms to cast homosexual demons out of me. When this wasn't creating the change I'd hoped for I admitted myself to a Christian residential program which worked with people with a 'homosexual problem' and rehabilitated them to become straight. It was actually an abusive/cultish environment and I left after 6 months. I had been told at the beginning that it would take one to two years before I would be rid of homosexual temptations.

I moved to regional NSW for work and joined a Pentecostal church there. It was here that I met the girl who would become my wife. I was very much encouraged by the pastor to marry and believed this would be a part of my healing. My wife and I had two beautiful daughters and I loved the idea that I was now 'normal' as a husband and father. Was I straight? No. I was what I would call today a situational heterosexual ([attachment No.2](#)). Thoughts and temptations still existed but I suppressed and denied them with some degree of success but never completely.

Over the next 16 years I rose to become a leader in the Assemblies of God, founded a national evangelistic ministry and every weekend, as a high profile preacher, preached to congregations in their 1,000's in Australia's mega-churches; such as Hillsong.

In 1991 all this changed when I fell in love with a man I'd met. This experience shocked me out of my denial I'd been living in and I was forced to face the reality the 22 years I'd spent doing everything possible, including 16 years of marriage had actually changed nothing. I was not only still gay but was in love with a man.

The story gets very complex around this time but suffice to say I ended up resigning from the ministry, left my marriage, family, church and faith believing I could never actually be gay and a Christian. These were devastating times and we all suffered great trauma having to finally face the truth.

I was out but had been extremely damaged emotionally and psychologically by the toll of years of suppression, denial and self hatred around my sexual orientation. Over the next 6 years the

conditioning of shame and self-loathing played out in self destructive behaviours and dysfunctional relationships.

In 1998 I began at last to do my own research into sexual orientation both scientifically and theologically. I discovered that whilst there appears to be no one cause of homosexuality in human beings, the factors that influence this are prenatal with a combination of hormonal and genetic influences. This is a very different to the message presented by ex-gay/reparative/conversion organisations and proponents who tell us homosexuality is a choice that is initially caused by sexual abuse, poor relationships with parents or pornography. I also discovered that the bible verses I'd read and had been quoted to me so often that I was an abomination and could never be a Christian as an accepting gay man, were actually not speaking about homosexuality as we know it today but were about same sex practices in the contexts of pagan rituals and temple prostitution. It was a huge discovery to find out the word homosexual had never appeared in an English translation of the Bible till 1946.

My experience with ex-gay survivors

With my new liberating understanding I determined that I would do all I could to ensure that not one person spent one day in the unnecessary internal torment I lived in for 22 years.

- **Online ex-gay survivor community**

In **2000** I commenced Australia's only online support group for ex-gay survivors (people who have done ex-gay/reparative/conversion therapy or attended groups. As the group grew to over 400 people it gave me a real insight into the experience of others and that mine was not that unique. What became increasingly obvious was the common impacts, coming from a place of internal torment and shame, had on those who had submitted themselves to any SOCE.

- Depression
- Thoughts of suicide
- Attempted suicide
- Self destructive behaviours
- Obsessive or addictive behaviour patterns
- Other mental health issues
- Isolation - a sense of disconnection from both the LGBT and Christian communities

For many these were not just experienced going through SOCE but had lingered on after the event; sometimes for years. And there were some who were permanently traumatised to the point where they were unable to function normally and were receiving government assistance as they were unable to work. Whilst lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people from faith backgrounds have struggles reconciling the perceived conflict between their faith and sexuality ([attachment No.3](#)) those who have actively sort help from Christian SOCE organisations have been the most damaged.

- **A Life of Unlearning opens the floodgate of hidden ex-gay survivors**

In **2004** I released my autobiography *A Life of Unlearning –coming out of the Church, one man's struggle*. This opened a floodgate of responses from readers whose emails frequently commenced with the words "your story is my story". By far the vast majority of these people had never spoken to anyone else about their experiences. This once again brought me in contact with more closeted ex-gay survivors. I say closeted, as even though they had now accepted their sexuality there was such a deep sense of failure and shame attached to their SOCE experience they were only now finding someone safe to share it with and who they could relate to.

- **Freedom2b**

In **2005** I co-founded [Freedom2b](#) which has become Australia's largest support network for LGBT people from Christian backgrounds. The majority of people who connected with the online forums and chapter meetings were from Pentecostal, Charismatic and Evangelical backgrounds. It is from these backgrounds that SOCE organisations and practices have flourished. Freedom2b has literally saved lives. [Shan - 19 year old country guy trying to make](#)

[sense of things...](#) is just one of those. It was during my 6 years growing and leading the organisation that I came in contact with even more ex-gay survivors. Yes, Freedom2b has had a powerful impact, but we were not able to help them all. Sadly, [Damien Christie](#), whose [story](#) was told in the Sydney Morning Herald on April 8, 2012, took his own life in 2013. Damien had been severely damaged psychologically during his time seeking SOCE.

- **One on one coaching with gay and lesbian people in heterosexual marriages**

I have also worked as coach and some of my clients have been gay and lesbian people who are in heterosexual marriages. Some of these had gone through SOCE in earlier years and like myself were encouraged to get married or believed this would be the final solution to their 'problem'. But now, often in midlife, they are coming to terms with the fact that they have been and always will be gay. The aftermath of disclosure can be devastating not only for them but of course for their spouses and children. I was horrified to hear [Ron Brookman](#), the leader of the Living Waters program (a SOCE) say to The Senate Same-Sex Marriage Inquiry on 28 May 2012 that he encouraged gay men he worked with to get married. *'In the last six months I have celebrated the weddings of two ex-gay men who have married beautiful wives and two couples who have given birth to babies who would never have been born had they not transitioned from homosexuality'*. History tells us that the vast majority of these mixed orientation marriages will end in devastation and disillusionment.

- **The Cure Documentary**

Whilst numerous documentaries have been made in the USA about the harm of SOCE and telling survivor stories, [The Cure](#) is the only Australian made [documentary](#) which deals with the topic. Produced by Rambling Women Media their website says " *The narrative of the film is a chronological retelling of the history of ex-gay therapies in Australia and New Zealand, as told by participants and one-time group leaders of prominent organisations such as Exodus and Living Waters. "The Cure" sets out to inform the audience by valuing the ethics of balanced filmmaking, and in spite of the notoriously secretive nature of reorientation programs in Australia the filmmakers were able to secure an interview with Ron Brookman, current leader of Living Waters Inc Australia and one-time gay man.* "

The film was premiered at the 2012 Mardi Gras Film festival and has had sell out showings at similar events. From there it captured mainstream media attention as many Australians were completely unaware of the existence of such programs. I was able to assist Rambling Women Media with initial consultation and connect them with former participants of SOCE who were prepared to tell their stories in such a public way. Once again it revealed the emotional trauma experienced during this time and after as well as contributions from psychologist Paul Martin. The interview with Ron Brookman, leader of the Living Waters program, revealed that even though heterosexuality is regularly proclaimed by such leaders because of marriage and children, that same sex attractions still exist. But these are passed off as thoughts/temptations as opposed to orientation. It's a form of double-speak/denial.

- **Online programs are the most insidious and dangerous**

Imagine this. You are a young teenager who lives in a Christian home, possibly goes to a Christian school, and all your friends are in the local Christian youth group. You are heavily involved in a church. In all these contexts the only thing you have ever heard is that homosexuality is a sin and abomination. When you begin to realise that you might be gay or lesbian, because of what you've heard, you can't talk to your parents, friends, teachers, youth leader or pastor – so what do you do? In the secrecy of your room you Google 'unwanted same sex attraction' looking for solutions to your dilemma. You find sites like [Door of Hope - Setting Captives Free](#) and [Living Hope Ministries](#) who offer online support. All this is done anonymously both by the seeker and also the person providing advice and support. We don't know what qualifications these people have, if any. There is no duty of care. No reporting. No-one they are accountable to. I know of several young people who connected with overseas online programs and attempted suicide whilst doing the program or soon afterwards when they felt they had 'failed'. All of these young people were under 18 at the time.

Recent developments

- The UK based Association of Christian Counsellors [released a statement to its members in January 2014](#) prohibiting reparative therapy.
- In the USA, California and New Jersey have banned SOCE for minors. SOCE practitioners appealed these decisions but lost their case. Maryland, Minnesota and New York states are currently considering introducing the same legislation.
- The President of Exodus International, the umbrella organisation for religious SOCE ministries and organisations admitted publicly in 2012 that 99% of the people he met through his organisation had not changed their sexual orientation. In June last year, at the invitation of Mr Chambers, [I attended](#) the final annual Exodus Conference in Los Angeles where the organisation was closed down after nearly four decades. In the previous year, Exodus had denounced reparative therapy. The day before the conference Chambers issued an [apology](#) which included admitting the harm they had caused. *"I have begun thinking again about how to apologize to the people that have been hurt by Exodus International through an experience or by a message. I have heard many firsthand stories from people called ex-gay survivors. Stories of people who went to Exodus affiliated ministries or ministers for help only to experience more trauma. I have heard stories of shame, sexual misconduct, and false hope."*
- Randy Thomas, the vice president, of Exodus, went even further in his apology saying *"I look back on my time as a Living Waters coordinator (eleven years ago) with the most remorse. Even though there is some good in this program, it often ripped open old wounds in the name of healing by attempting to manufacture an environment for the Lord to work in. I have to apologize for the times some people may have felt manipulated to bare their souls to a group full of strangers. I apologize for any pressure we, on the Living Waters team I led, might have placed on group participants as we tried to help them cultivate "authentic experiences."*

As a trained Living Waters coordinator, I used to hang on to every word Andrew Comiskey said. I even did some online consulting work for him. But today, over a year after leaving his employ as a consultant, I look back and recognize there were signs that something was wrong. In retrospect, I realize I helped build Andrew Comiskey's online platforms – platforms which have increasingly gotten more vitriolic and stigmatizing toward the LGBT community. I regret that and I'm sorry."

Considering that:

- SOCE participants have stated the harm they experienced being a part of these programs as well as the ongoing negative impact ([attachment No.4](#))
- All mental health professional bodies have said there is no scientific evidence that sexual orientation can be changed and that SOCE cause harm ([attachment No.5](#))
- SOCE former leaders in Australia have stated it didn't work including :
 - [Former Ex-gay Leader - John Meteyard](#) Exodus Asia Pacific & Living Waters Leader and on the International Advisory Board of Exodus
 - [Former Ex-gay Leader - Vonnie Pitts \(Veronica Canning\)](#) Christian City Church Pastor and Living Waters Leader Sydney
 - [Former Ex-gay Leader - Kim Brett](#) Exodus - Associate Former Leader - Living Waters and Liberty Inc Brisbane
 - [Former Ex-gay Leader - Wendy Lawson](#) Exodus Leader Melbourne
 - [Former Ex-gay Leader - Paul Martin](#) Exodus Leader – Melbourne
 - [Former Aussie Ex-gay Founder Simon Tinkler say like so many others "I was wrong"](#) Founder of Ministry One Brisbane
 - [Alan le May – A Christian heterosexual man's journey from tolerance to advocacy](#) Living Waters leader Brisbane
- SOCE's have contributed to mental health issues and even suicide.
- SOCE practitioners and organisations have no formally recognised qualifications to work with people at this level.
- SOCE practitioners and organisations have no duty of care policies that ensure people who leave their programs are safe and supported.

My recommendations to the committee are:

- That all SOCE practices be banned
- That Australian and overseas online SOCE organisations and individuals offering help for people who have 'unwanted same sex attraction' be blocked.

Should you require any additional information I'd be happy to supply it.

Sincerely

Anthony Venn-Brown

Founder and CEO of Ambassadors & Bridge Builders International (ABBI).

Honoured to be voted one of the 25 Most Influential Gay & Lesbian Australians (2007 & 2009) and finalist for the 2011 ACON Community Hero Award

Ambassadors & Bridge Builders International's mission is to create understanding and acceptance for LGBTI people. To discuss all your LGBTI awareness raising, training or consultancy needs please contact us for further details.

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