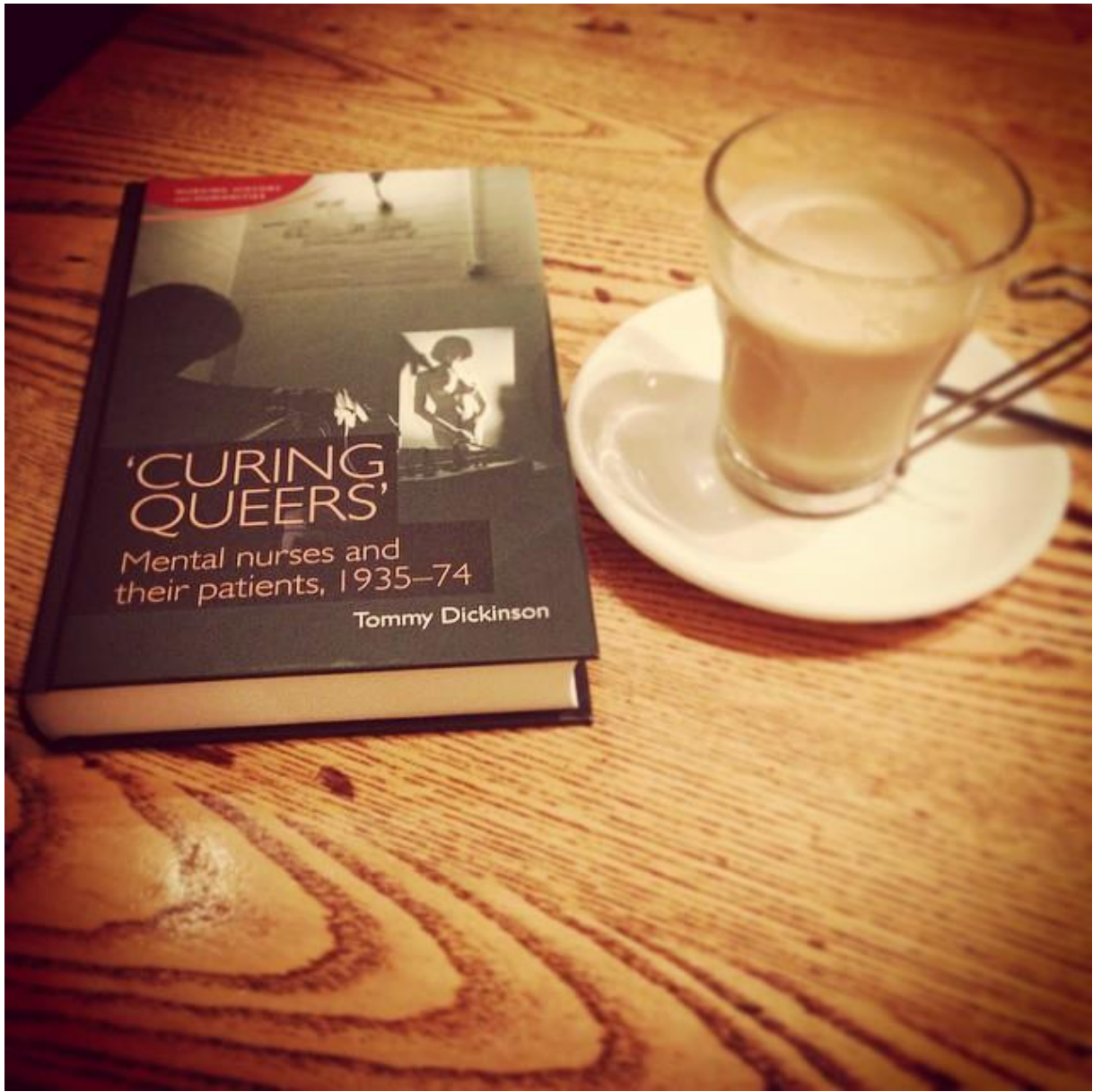


# Male Homosexuality as a Mental Illness to be 'Cured'

Dr Tommy Dickinson

Reader in Nursing Education & Head of the Department  
of Mental Health Nursing

King's College London



**'CURING  
QUEERS'**

Mental nurses and  
their patients, 1935-74

Tommy Dickinson

---

# Participants

Eight former patients:

- All were male at the time they received treatments to change their sexuality.
  - Ages at the time of interview ranged from 65 years to 97 years.
-

---

# Cont.

Seventeen mental nurses:

- Eight men and nine women.
- At the time of their interviews, their ages ranged from 63 years to 98 years.
- Two commenced nursing in the 1930s, five in the 1950s and eight in the 1960s.
- All the nurses administered the treatments in NHS hospitals.

***\*All names of the participants are pseudonyms. The testimonies you will hear contain graphic descriptions of the treatments members of the LGBTQ community were subjected to, which some people may find distressing.\****

---



---

## Treatments (cont.)

- Oestrogen Treatment - "Chemical Castration".
  - "Social skills training"
  - No general protocol or ethical guidelines - treatment of choice was very experimental and usually based on the unilateral decision of the consultant psychiatrist underpinned with no firm evidence base.
-

---

# Reflections on Treatments

Herbert Bliss, interviewed 2 February 2010.



---

## Reasons or motivations why the patients received aversion therapy:

- Patients either sought help and treatment of their own accord owing to the turmoil they found themselves in realising they were homosexual.
  - Through the courts: prison or hospital?
  - Due to unsupportive family, police, social and media attitudes.
-





---

Reasons or motivations why the patients  
received aversion therapy:

Ughtred Lovis-Douglas, interviewed 4 November 2012



---

# Aftermath of the Treatments

- The treatments appeared peter out with the decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales in 1967, the removal from the DSM in 1974, and the influence of the Gay Liberation Front in the early 1970s.
- None of the participants reported any efficacy.
- All participants reported still being disturbed by the treatments they received:

Barrington Crowther-Lobley, interviewed 28 April 2010.



---

# Conclusions

- These testimonies show that the courts and unsympathetic family, police, media and social attitudes prompted people to seek treatment.
  - It exposes the equivocal way in which patients and nurses read and listened to influential cultural outputs and acted in accordance with these.
  - Limited evidence base, no general protocol or guidelines. Variation in the treatments received.
  - Efficacy based on self-reported outcomes by the patients, led to patients, and nurses, being able to subvert the treatment process.
  - For the patients in this study the treatments were ineffective and had lasting long term negative effects
-

## Cont.

- Defining homosexuality as a mental illness and implementing inefficient and brutal treatments to eradicate it appears to have had a lasting negative impact on the patients who received them.
- It is envisaged that this study might also act as a reminder of the need for health and social care practitioners to ensure their interventions have a sound evidence base and that they constantly reflect on their morals and values; and the influence that science, societal norms and contexts can have on changing views of what is regarded as “acceptable practice”.
- We can learn much from studying aspects of our profession’s past in which our actions, even if countenanced by the context in which they were situated, did not serve patients and society well.

---

**Thank you for listening!**

**Any questions?**

**Twitter:** @DrTommy79

Special thanks to the Royal College of Nursing Monica Baly Bursary, the Royal Historical Association & the Wellcome Trust for funding the study.

If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this lecture, the LGBT Foundation may be able to offer support. You can call them on: 0345 3 30 30 30

---