

# Views: Our Bodies, Our Minds

Several years ago I was working in a large mental health agency as an addictions clinician. I like to think that most people in the mental health field are enlightened folks, but that isn't always the case.

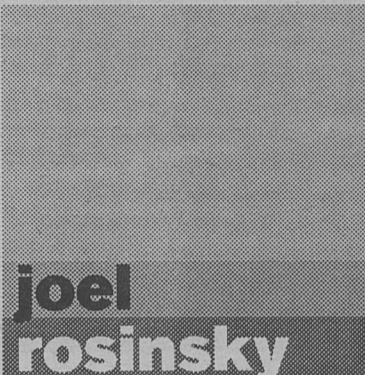
I was shocked (probably shouldn't have been) when during a conversation with one of my master's level co-workers, I heard her make the following statement: "There are two different kinds of lesbians." My jaw dropped and I inquired as to what those two types were.

She told me that first, some of her "best friends" were lesbians, and that "those people" were either "butch or fem." She even said that she spent some time with her "friends" in gay bars in New York when she lived there for a while.

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What came next was even more surprising. After stating my objection to her stereotyping an entire community of diverse folks, I was told by my supervisor (straight MSW) and medical director (not-straight MD), that I was over-reacting. Like hell I was. The gay community isn't the first, nor will it be the last, to be reduced to a cultural stereotype as a means of diminishing its value to society.

The idea of seeking out a therapist or doctor might be stressful enough without the additional burden of being subjected to inappropriate or insensitive questions, or having the important questions missed altogether.



er. Whether they come from a place of ignorance or personal bias, these helping professionals can, and often enough do, produce more harm than good.

If a client doesn't feel like they're getting adequate treatment, or being treated with dignity and respect, they might not say anything. Years of living under a state of chronic hostility often enough teaches one to just accept second-class treatment and not complain. In response, people stop looking to get their needs met, and go without the help they deserve.

So, when I first heard about *Our Bodies Our Minds*, the Vermont Diversity Health Project directory, I was very excited about the idea. It's a Chittenden County directory of health and wellness resources for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer community with over 150 health care providers giving detailed information about their practices and services. Additional information on providers throughout the state can be accessed at [www.ru12.org](http://www.ru12.org). The VDHP is also offering training to providers who wish to improve their relationships with the GLBT community.

I remember on several occasions during the last eight or ten years consciously looking for an assortment of health care providers that I could feel comfortable with. I wanted to deal with professionals with whom I could address any issue I might have, without worrying about

possible reactions, or even more importantly, quality of care. Like many people, I have run into the problem of coming out to a doctor or other practitioner and encountered a shifting of the helping relationship into one of either indifference or outright hostility. Hopefully, that kind of attitude is finally changing.

So, I made lots of copies of the form I had to fill out to be included in the directory and gave a number of them to friends. I sent mine in, and waited. When the first edition came out I remember thinking that this would have been a great thing to have had when I was a teen back in the '60s and first coming out. Back in the early '60s (pre-Stonewall) my reality was living in the shadows and not wanting anyone to know that I was gay.

A directory like this, filled with credible professionals of every discipline, offering a broad constellation of health care services, goes a long way toward raising the quality of life for me and my "family." Knowing up front that the services you're looking for will be provided in an atmosphere of acceptance and genuine caring goes a long way towards forming that professional relationship.

Folks are different. And there are far more than two types of lesbians or gay men. And there are these same differences in helping professionals. We are each burdened with our own set of biases and idiosyncrasies. I'm better matched with some clients than others, and I need to know my areas of expertise and comfort. And so do the clients. In fact, they are entitled to know if professionals are competent to treat them.

So, pick up a copy of the directory and use it. Give one to a friend as a gift. Encourage good health care providers to list themselves in the online version and future hard copies, and don't tolerate — even for a second — second class treatment from anyone. ▼

*Our Bodies, Our Minds is available at RU12?, Outright, and SafeSpace in Burlington.*

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