

Lesbian / Gay Health

Lesbians and Gay Men Join Mental Health Field

To borrow a phrase from the cigarette commercial "you've come a long way baby." Lesbian/gay/bisexual people have suffered much at the hands of psychology, but today they are becoming leaders in the very field which once labelled them sick.

Bill Lippert, a gay psychologist, Executive Director of the Counseling Service of Addison County and President of the Vermont Council of Community Mental Health Centers, and Howard Russell, psychologist-intern at the same agency, presented a workshop on the advent of sexual minorities into the field of counseling and psychotherapy at the regional (New England) conference of the National Council of Community Mental Health Centers held in October in Burlington.

One woman who attended the workshop called it "refreshing" in a conference which was heavily attended by bureaucrats and administrators and little by front-line workers or mental health consumers.

The older lesbian/gay/bisexual person knows well the damage psychology has historically inflicted on sexual minorities. Until 1973, said Lippert and Russell, homosexuality was listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) as a mental disorder in and of itself. Political pressure from gay groups and a growing scientific enlightenment forced the removal of homosexuality as a sickness in the DSM-111 issued in 1973. The latest version of the DSM, (-111R), makes no mention of homosexuality.

Until 1973 gay men and women were often subjected to psychological techniques designed to change their sexual orientation. The treatments ranged from talk therapy to behavior modification using electroshock and emetics and other aversive stimuli. The University of Vermont conducted such a behavior modification program in the late 1960's. Howard Russell, who is currently studying for his masters degree, did research on the techniques used in the 1950's and 1960's. The amount of psychic "damage" is shocking, he commented.

"Mental health has not been a leader, but we should be leaders," said Lippert. "We do not have a proud history." Lippert said the listing of homosexuality as a mental disorder was "a reflection of society's prejudice" in earlier years.

"We are dealing with a very new phenomenon," he said. Today there are associations of gay psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers. Lippert added

that he is hoping non-discrimination clauses will be included in agency personnel policies across the country.

Lippert said that discrimination against sexual minorities is legal in all 50 states except Wisconsin. "This means that lesbian/gay/bisexual people can lose jobs, be denied credit, lose children and be denied housing."

"We are not 'marginal' people," he said. "We are not peripheral or expendable. We are essential to the well-being of society."

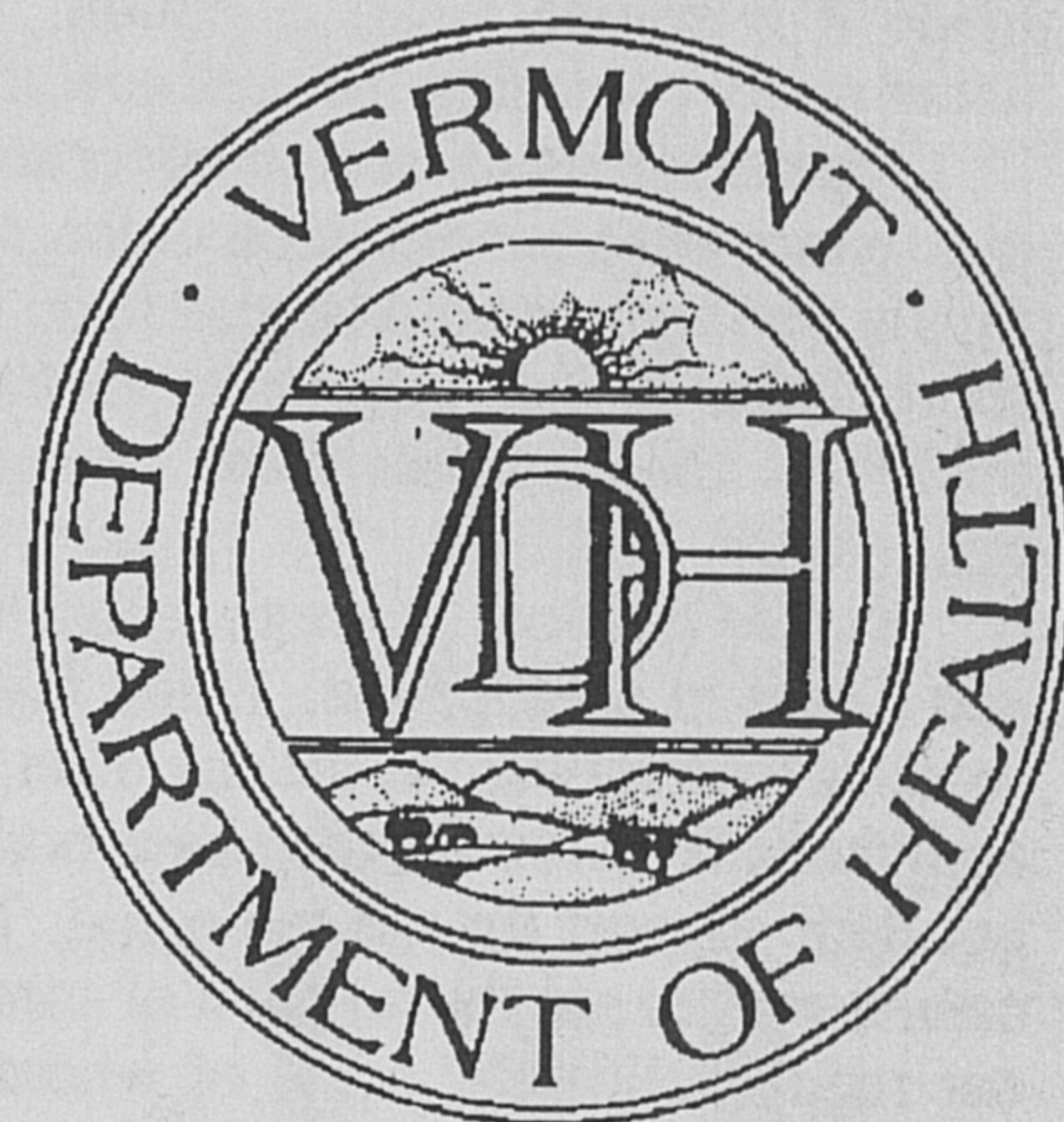
Lippert and Russell spoke of the importance of "allies" to discriminated minority groups--friends and family members who speak out against prejudice and discrimination. But they added "We don't want our allies to be dripping with guilt. They can be 'tremendously valuable' if their attitude is positive."

Both men spoke of the importance of sharing both happy and sad events with their co-workers. A newly-found lover or the loss of a lover are significant events in the lives of lesbians and gay men and they need to be talked about and shared. The impact of AIDS on gay people is frightening and it, too, needs to be shared with friends and co-workers.

Prejudice causes a phenomenon known as "scanning" which means simply "always watching" for signs of acceptance or non-acceptance. "It is easy to confuse this with paranoia" said Lippert, "but it has come from a necessary and functional place."

As more lesbians and gay men enter the "helping professions", lesbian and gay clients can hope for more help in adjusting to their personal lifestyle. It will be a great help for sexual minorities in becoming useful and productive citizens. It seems barbaric and prehistoric that behavior modification was used on sexual minorities until the 1970's. We need to realize that the older lesbian or gay man lived through that dark period of history and some still bear the scars of that sad time.

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