

## GMC Apology



### My story – Dr Aaron

I was born in the mid-1950's, and was around eleven when (male) homosexuality was partially decriminalised in England. I don't think I had any idea of those political events at the time, but there was a general sense of distaste towards campness and gays (if that word was even around then in my world). From about 6 or 7 to my pre-teens I had a thing for the boy next door – and by 8 or 9, boys at school. At about 15 I was invited to join a Methodist Youth group by some school friends and started churchgoing. I kind of knew I joined because I fancied them. I first seriously thought of medicine as a career around that time, in my O-Level year (as it was back then: now GCSE). But that firmed up during my Sixth Form (Years 12 & 13) while thinking about university and applying for Medical School.

I didn't think of myself as gay: I knew 'queer' was bad. The thought – fear – occurred to me, but I thought that wasn't possible because, in my mind, I was more attracted to girls (in fact, it was only about ten years after I been out, i.e. in my late fifties, that I realised all my school crushes had been on boys: no girls, ever. But somehow, I tricked myself into believing otherwise). When I was applying to be a medical student, I didn't think about it much (yet again). I just assumed that I wouldn't be allowed to be a doctor and gay.

At university, I joined the drama society and religious societies. I saw there was a gay society, but I was even too frightened to look much at the noticeboard, let alone join. I once wrote to the student newspaper supporting gay rights (I can't remember any details). I was asked by my then girlfriend if I was gay, which I denied (similarly with questions from my brother, schoolmates, on the wards...).

I did have some brief, secret, guilty, fumbles with fellow male students. I had started having girlfriends when I was at university, feeling I should get a girlfriend by the age of 20 and be married by 30 (which I was, with hindsight marrying my best friend – hardly the first gay person to do that). But as a medical student I continued to have crushes yet worry about being recognised as gay.

On a Methodist student day retreat, I took up the invitation to talk with the pastor and his wife in a break about any problems and told them I was worried about being attracted to men. They prayed over me, attempting an exorcism as they loudly tried to "cast out the sins of masturbation". My fellow students were just outside the room and I feared what they might hear. (I'm pleased, now, to say this exorcism failed in every way).

When I became a Junior House Officer. I (of course) had crushes on male colleagues, both in the surgical and medical posts. But, while at least one colleague

seemed gay, I suppressed it all. This continued into psychiatric training. I had painful crushes on twin male nurses, sadly (luckily?) on another ward. On my ward, I was once asked if I was "one of them", by (male) nursing staff, which I naturally denied. There was some joke about keeping backs to the wall.

I briefly dated a guy around that time. We'd met in a theatre (for plays) and he took me to a gay club, both exciting and scary. He offered to have full sex with me but though hugely tempted I was too frightened. I wonder now if that was a pivotal moment, in effect choosing to stay closeted. But I was terrified of being found out and avoided answering the phone when he rang the Christian community house where I then lived. I was still going to church, Methodist, becoming a local preacher. Despite knowing there was a gay club in town, I didn't dare go back. When the club closed a few years later, I learnt that several young men I knew through church, and fancied hugely, had gone to the closing party – I'd had no idea.

I left the church (for a few years) and joined the Young Socialists – and fell for another guy, a year or so younger than me. I thought he might be gay but didn't dare go into that. A few years later I was walking in the centre of town with my fiancée/girlfriend and saw him leading a gay rights march (this was around 1983). Of course, I said nothing to my girlfriend.

I married in the mid-1980's and a few months after went to another city for higher training, still having crushes on guys – at a swimming club, in an amateur theatre... I think the rise of HIV-AIDS from the mid-1980's almost passed me by – ditto Section 28: something I'm not proud of, both as a doctor and as a man who knew then I was attracted to other men, though not 'admitting' to being gay.

I remember going to Royal College of Psychiatry Meetings and noting there was a Lesbian and Gay Special Interest Group [SIG], now the Rainbow SIG), but not daring to go as I might be 'seen' by colleagues. I moved to another city when I became a consultant in 1990; the crushes on men continued.

However, after my middle brother and father died within a few weeks of each other, I was very shaken up. I started to realise my own mortality. And I think that made me feel I should do something about my same sex feelings, rather than just go on as I was for the rest of my life. I was becoming increasingly tense and low. That summer, 1995, I contacted a Gay Switchboard – writing the number on a small piece of paper I then hid in the loft. With advice on how to meet men safely, I started going to gay saunas – though guilty and very scared of being seen. At a sauna I saw ads in the local 'Pink Paper' that led me to a men's sexual health charity and a bisexual support group, 'reasoning' I must be bi as I was married. I thought – told myself? –

there was no such thing as married gay men. Again, I simply avoided looking into the facts.

I watched 'Queer As Folk' (1999) late at night in the family home, volume turned right down. Amazed, but grateful it was shown late when my children and wife were in bed.

I attended Royal College meetings, including the 2003 Annual Conference. This was during controversies over about appointing a gay priest as a bishop. As I often did when away from home, I went to a gay club and was struck by how the club, my idea of heaven, might be some christians' idea of hell. For the first time I found the courage to go to the Lesbian & Gay SIG conference session. I sat nervously towards the back. But I went to the lunch that they held afterwards.

And it was during that lunch that the penny dropped. For the first time in my life, I was talking with gay (and lesbian) doctors and we knew each other's names. I realised that, for sure, right then, this was my place. That I was gay. That lunch, simply talking and eating with my peers, was my point of no return. I was 47.

I accessed a local LGBT charity and came out to my wife that autumn. I had a lot of support through that early coming out period, both very exciting and very difficult. I was sometimes suicidal because of my guilt around the effect on the children, thinking they'd be better off with me dead, 'reasoning' that while they could recover from grief after my death, they would always suffer the shame of having a living but gay father. Friends in a gay group and professional (LGB) support got me through, maybe saved my life. After New Year (so as not to spoil their Christmas) I told the children and others they knew - mostly other family members, teachers etc. - also staff at work. I didn't want the children to have to cover up for me, or find out from someone else. (I also 'came out' as atheist, which in all honesty I'd been for some years.)

After the big and difficult coming out to the children I moved out part-time to a nearby flat, spending half each week with the family - the children were still quite young. It wasn't necessarily the perfect solution but it seemed the best, having talked it through with friends, supporters and my wife (she has never showed any homophobia and didn't reject me, obviously a huge plus. That continues to this day and I've got good relations with her and my now adult children.)

I didn't really have much trouble after coming out at work. I remember colleagues being positive - and seeing a change in me, becoming much less tense. I joined the Royal College Gay & Lesbian SIG and got involved in the Trust LGBT staff group. Once, with a gay mental health nurse, I held an LGBT awareness session at the

Psychiatric lunchtime meeting. One of the consultants fired questions at the nurse about his father. With hindsight, he was pursuing the 'theory' that being gay is caused by a weak father, part of the fake mythology behind conversion therapy. Whilst in the Royal College SIG and on the Executive, I was involved in the early drafts of the College statements on conversion therapy.

How much the GMC had to do with my being closeted for so long is hard to say. I think, while I was convinced that I couldn't practice as a doctor if I was gay, my closet was also packed with societal, religious, internalised homophobia, in ways I can't disentangle into a neat account just about the GMC.

I thank GLADD for this chance to tell my story as a gay doctor. To be honest, though I'm looking back decades and I've told my story in different ways before, writing this has been upsetting – perhaps because it's about how deeply homophobia and fear of the GMC has affected my career and life.

I was going to be cautious and put 'may have' affected. But that wouldn't be honest. I know it has.