

SUBMISSION

Senate Inquiry into the Marriage Equality Amendment
Bill 2012 and the Marriage Amendment Bill 2012

Contact:

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I have provided the same information that is in this submission to The Prime Minister, Federal Attorney General and MP's in meetings and they stated that have found this to be valuable.

Paul Martin's Professional Background

I am a psychologist with over 25 years experience specialising in mental health and same sex attraction. I train GP's, Psychologists, Psychiatrists, Social Workers, Counsellors, Managers in organizations and Christian leaders about the psychological issues facing those who are gay, lesbian and bisexual. I am often asked to participate on expert panels, speak to the media, am featured in documentaries, present at forums and conferences, and write chapters of professional texts and other books on the issue of mental health and same sex attraction.

Endorsement of Psychological Evidence

The mental health issues that same sex attracted people experience due to the lack of a choice to marry are highlighted in the Australian Psychological Society's recent endorsement of the resolution made by the American Psychological Association. This "called for the legalisation of same-sex marriage, on the basis of psychological evidence showing the mental health benefits of marriage, and the harm caused by social exclusion and discrimination arising from not having the choice to marry." Professor Simon Crowe, President of the APS, said: "Decades of psychological research provides the evidence linking marriage to mental health benefits, and highlighting the harm to individuals' mental health of social exclusion. The APS supports the full recognition of same-sex relationships, on the basis of this evidence."

Psychological Issues Facing those who are Vulnerable and Same Sex Attracted

The mental and physical health of same-sex attracted people is measurably poorer than for the population generally. Data from Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing demonstrates that they are twice as likely to use illicit drugs and experience high levels of psychological distress, and are 4 times more likely to attempt suicide.

These issues are not a result of the psychological effect of same-sex attraction. All psychological evidence demonstrates that being same sex attracted is not a disorder. Poor health outcomes are the result of the high levels of psychological distress experienced growing up surrounded by negative attitudes and behaviours to same-sex attraction. Growing up gay or lesbian is to grow up as something you've been taught to hate. These 'homophobic' messages continue to occur into adulthood and can intensify the distress.

They can take the form of hate crime, workplace discrimination and being excluded from 'normal' society. Worst of all, this homophobia can be internalised leading same-sex attracted people to hate and harm themselves.

Evidence of the Link Between Marriage Equality & Mental Health

Studies from North America and Europe have shown that feelings of well-being, security and acceptance among same-sex attracted people and their family members increases dramatically when same-sex couples have the choice to marry.

This is for two reasons. First, some of the most negative messages internalised by same-sex attracted people are about the instability and worthlessness of same-sex relationships. Second, marriage, with its emphasis on care, commitment and fidelity, continues to define the meaning of love and relationships in our society. The government reinforces the very worst stereotypes about gay and lesbian people when it excludes them from marriage.

The American Psychological Society states: "Emerging evidence suggests that statewide campaigns to deny same-sex couples legal access to civil marriage are a significant source of stress to the lesbian, gay, and bisexual residents of those states and may have negative effects on their psychological well-being." They also report that: "The denial of civil marriage, including the creation of legal statuses such as civil unions and domestic partnerships, stigmatizes same-sex relationships, perpetuates the stigma historically attached to homosexuality, and reinforces prejudice against lesbian, gay, and bisexual people"

These conclusions are echoed by recent Australian psychological research. In a paper recently released researchers from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales called on the Government to allow same-sex marriages as a preventative health measure.

The researchers, led by Professor Ann Ritter, cite studies which show a direct link between marriage equality and reduced alcohol and drug consumption. They also cite studies showing a link between marriage equality and reduced HIV infections as well as the positive health benefits of marriage generally.

According to the paper, "The best public-policy interventions are those which target a significant problem, have a clear rationale, are supported by research evidence, are least costly to implement and have strong community support. Legalising gay marriage as an alcohol and drug policy response meets these criteria. It is now time to legalise gay marriage, as an important contribution to reducing alcohol and other drug harm in Australia."

Case Study from my Practice

I can best illustrate the connection between mental health and marriage equality through describing a teenage client I recently saw. Unfortunately, his case is similar to many others. The client came in to see me with his mother. She was very distressed, speaking of how she found him just in time to save him from an overdose which could have killed him. This intelligent, creative and caring teenager was much loved by his family and friends, and had his whole life ahead of him. I asked him why. He said that the worst words to be called at

his school yard were ‘fag’ or ‘poof’, his pastor said “they” won’t be welcome in Heaven, and his father said, ‘all poofers should be taken to an island and shot’.

But what hurt him most was what people said about gay relationships: that they don’t work and that all gays are just interested in sex.

“For me, being gay was the worst thing in the world”, he said.

“A little while back, I finally got the guts to come out. My friends and family were surprisingly okay and I started feeling some hope. Then one night I saw a prominent politician saying that marriage is only for a man and woman. I suddenly felt that everything people had said about gay relationships is true. I always dreamed of being with someone for all of my life, so I thought... ‘What’s the point?’

He wasn’t blaming anyone else for his actions, but his story clearly demonstrates how easily discriminatory laws and the leaders who defend these laws exacerbate psychological damage and confirm internalised homophobic beliefs.

When our leaders allow same sex couples to marry, this will send out the most powerful message possible that same-sex relationships are just as valid and valuable as heterosexual ones. Equality in marriage for all Australians will improve the psychological wellbeing of many thousands of Australians.