



▶▶ GLBT News

Study Comparing Gay Life Span & Smoking Disputed

by Arielle Chavkin
EDGE New York City Contributor
Thursday Jul 26, 2007

"But what if you're gay and you smoke?" -Arielle Chavkin



Which one will cut your life short more quickly?
According to a roundly criticized study, being gay is worse than smoking cigarettes.

In March 2007, at a Philadelphia meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, EPA President Dr. Philip Henline waited for Drs. Paul and Kirk Cameron to present what he had expected would be a poster presentation, "Federal Distortion of Homosexual Footprint." According to the information submitted for prior review by the study's authors, the presentation would discuss findings on the true size of the gay community as a result of the exclusion of adults over the age of 60 in government tallies.

The study that Dr. Paul Cameron and his son, Dr. Kirk Cameron, presented to the prestigious group of mental-health academics and professionals purported to "prove" that homosexuality is more lethal than smoking. The study, it turns out, was funded by the Family Research Institute, the conservative Christian Colorado Springs-based think tank that proclaims as its "one overriding mission: to generate empirical research on issues that threaten the traditional family, particularly homosexuality, AIDS, sexual social policy, and drug abuse." Dr. Cameron serves as chairman of FRI.

The stated goal of the study was to demonstrate that legally married heterosexual couples live nearly 24 years longer than homosexual couples. The study used statistics gathered by Drs. Cameron from Denmark, Norway, the United States and Canada. "Smoking is condemned because it is associated with a reduction in longevity of 1 to 7 years," Cameron wrote in the study. "It is inconsistent to condemn smoking yet celebrate homosexuality when the decrement in life span for those practicing homosexuality approximates 20 or more years."

EPA President Henline had expected to see a poster presentation entitled "Federal Distortion of Homosexual Footprint." According to the information submitted for review by the authors of the study, the original presentation was meant to discuss findings on what the authors said was an exaggeration of the size of the gay community as a result of the exclusion of adults over the age of 60 in official government tallies.

The final study's full title, "Federal Distortion of Homosexual Footprint (Ignoring Early Gay Death?)," does, in fact, begin study by attempting to prove that the size of homosexuals would decrease if it didn't include those over the age of 65. The reasoning? The vast majority of homosexuals don't live long enough to reach into their sixth decade.

To support this "early demise" theory of queer life in Scandinavia and North America, Cameron gathered statistics from Denmark and Norway regarding the number of deaths of those men who were in same-sex relationships. He then compared that number to those in heterosexual relationships. In Norway, all men at birth in the study who married have an average life expectancy of 76.5. Contrast that to all of the gay partnered men in the study, who have an average life expectancy of only 51.7. For women, the difference was 56.4 to 80.9, respectively.

Many informed observers, however, believe Cameron's methodology is at best unsound. Jim Burroway, editor of the Box Turtle Bulletin, a gay news website, complains that Cameron's ignored what he calls "the obvious question: Who are the people who are entering domestic partnerships?"

The surprising answer, according to Burroway is that in terms of age, they are only slightly older than their heterosexual counterparts. But since domestic partnerships have only been around for a few years, the same-sex group simply hasn't been around long enough to accumulate enough qualified people who are old to make a significant data base.

This violates one of the most fundamental concepts in set theory. Consider this: People entering your set are a certain average age, and your set hasn't been around very long. Then those who die in that set aren't going to be very old, either. "Often," Burroway said, "I find Cameron ignores the elementary, hoping nobody will notice."

Cameron apparently gathered his statistic from the Washington Blade, a local Washington, D.C., gay newsweekly. "Each obituary with enough detail was coded for age-at-death, whether the individual as gay or lesbian, whether the deceased was partnered at time of death, and whether the death was due to HIV/AIDS or some other cause," Cameron writes in his study.

Obituary studies like this one are nothing new for Cameron. He has relied on them to gather data before. In 1992, he and colleagues William J. Playfair and Steven Wellum wrote a similar study for the Family Research Institute entitled "The Homosexual Lifespan" that used mined similar data.

'His statistics make their way into legitimate news media outlets without the person repeating the statistics knowing where they came from.'

Dr. Gregory Herek, a psychology professor at the University of California at Davis, believes that data from obituaries is at best unreliable. Among the many gay men and lesbians who wouldn't be in a Washington Blade obituary: those outside of gay life; those in the closet; those

whose families didn't send in an obituary or hid the deceased's sexuality; and those who died too quickly for an obituary to be written. Finally, as Burroway notes, "The gay press is largely urban, and generally doesn't cover rural areas."

Cameron's study of obituaries shows no discernable difference in the mortality statistics in more tolerant countries (Canada, Norway, Denmark) from those in the more intolerant ones (United States). In other words, according to Cameron's research, discrimination doesn't have an effect on death rates of homosexuals. His conclusion is that "...if society wants to excuse from good citizenship those who engage in same-sex relations, because it meets the approval of gay activists, it will have to do so without claiming any health benefit."

As if it weren't enough to assert that being gay is a sentence of early death, Cameron then discredits gay adoption. He claims it is "ill-advised since, on average, a homosexual couple aged 35 yr. would be about as close to

demise as a man-woman couple age 55 yr." [sic].

He even takes aim at funding for patients with HIV. Since nobody has to smoke or participate in gay sex, "disproportionate expenditures on HIV seem unfair, given that the association between HIV infection and same-sex sex is similar to the association between lung cancer and smoking." (He fails to mention that the government, either through programs like Medicaid or heavy subsidies of hospitals and other treatment facilities, in fact does take care of smokers suffering from related illnesses.)

Cameron assumes that men-on-men sex is the only means of contracting HIV. In fact, the Center for Disease Control calculates that non gay sex-induced cases of HIV accounted for well over one-third of all such reported cases in 2005.

According to Jason Cianciotto, Senior Fellow at the Task Force, it is Cameron's ability to complicate and cloak his data that makes him so effective. "He has really mastered the art of pulling the wool over peoples' eyes who aren't knowledgeable enough about social science research to decipher what he writes."

Unfortunately, this is not the first time Cameron has written about "the homosexual lifestyle." Other works include "Child Molestation and Homosexuality," "Gay Foster Parents More Apt to Molest," "Violence and Homosexuality" and "The Psychology of Homosexuality".

At this point, the question becomes how seriously should anyone take Cameron's work? Or rather, with how much fervor should it be repudiated? "Unfortunately, there are a number of policy makers and more mainstream advocates who are using Cameron's statistics," Cianciotto said. "So I think we have to pay attention to him so that he doesn't continue to pull the wool over peoples' eyes."

Burroway agrees. "I can't tell you how many times his statistics manage to make their way into legitimate news media outlets, often without the person repeating the statistics knowing where it came from," he said. "So I think it's very important to immediately analyze everything he puts out and get the real story so people can discover how bad his science really is."

To read Cameron's "study," go to
<http://www.disc.ua.es/~gil/CameronHomosexualFootprint.pdf>

To read Jim Burroway's repudiation on the box Turtle Bulletin, go to
<http://www.boxturtlebulletin.com/Articles/000,018.htm>

A graduate of Tufts University, Arielle Chavkin is a freelance writer living in Manhattan.