

Health and Well-being of Young People

A British Naturism Briefing Paper - Malcolm Boura – September 2010

There is a commonly held view, despite polling evidence to the contrary, that most people are offended by nudity and think that some parts of the body are so inherently shameful that they must be kept secret. It allows people who are embarrassed by the human body to wield influence out of all proportion to their numbers and for taboos and prejudice to take precedence over social good. The euphemism “*naughty bits*” clearly illustrates the problem.

The consequences of body embarrassment are well established and the mechanisms well understood but there is incredible reluctance to face up to the implications.

Attitudes

Attitudes to nudity in the UK contrast strongly with many other European countries. In Denmark nudity is acceptable on almost all beaches. In The Netherlands and Germany mixed nude sauna is the norm. In Spain a police officer was prosecuted for harassing a nude cyclist. In the UK many people believe, wrongly, that nudity is illegal except on designated beaches.

Sexual Health

Western Europe outperforms the UK, often by a factor of five or more, across a wide range of indicators, including teenage pregnancy and abortion rates. There are many reasons but a major contributor is lack of knowledge compounded by the nudge-nudge, wink-wink attitude of large parts of the media and society.

Sex education makes a valuable contribution but it can at best have only limited success when it is fighting the attitudes of a society. Sex education is severely constrained and few teachers will risk answering a child's questions outside the narrow confines of a few hours per year of formal sex education.¹ Consequently young people gain much of their knowledge of the body from playground mythology, experimentation, or from vested interests such as the entertainment, cosmetics and pornography industries. Should the images in publications such as *The Daily Sport* and lads mags be the only images of the naked body that our young people see?

International comparisons show strong correlations² between prudery and poor outcomes and the differences are enormous. Compared to the most successful European countries, teenagers in the USA become sexually active nearly a year younger, are less likely to use a condom or contraception and more likely to be promiscuous. The results are predictable. Several times more likely to have an abortion, nearly ten times more likely to become pregnant and several tens of times more likely to contract gonorrhoea³. The mechanisms linking attitudes to outcomes are well understood.⁴

Breastfeeding

Policies to encourage breastfeeding face an uphill battle so long as some parts of the body are treated as dirty, or shameful. Breasts are not as frowned upon as genitals but attitudes are similar and they are a major contributor to the problem.⁵

Embarrassment

Embarrassment causes many people to delay seeing the doctor. This increases the severity and spread of sexually transmitted infections and it increases the fatality rate from

several types of cancer. As one rectal cancer specialist said “*people literally die from embarrassment*”.⁶

Other

We strongly suspect a link between prudery and body dysmorphic disorders such as anorexia. Several TV programmes have demonstrated the benefits of increased body confidence.⁷ There are infections linked to clothing. Some, such as athlete's foot are trivial, but others are much more serious, for example MRSA⁸.

Censorship

There are thousands of censors, official and unofficial, but there is absolutely nobody with responsibility for combating harmful censorship. Censorship mainly serves to restrict the content of the mainstream media but it does little to restrict the availability of pornography, poor role models or erroneous information.

Policy

It is recognised that a holistic approach is required but actions fall well short of that ideal. We are not aware of any government consultation which even mentions the impact of policy or legislation on body related attitudes and hence body related outcomes. As a result legislation and policy frequently conspire to create a climate which contributes significantly to poorer outcomes.

Conclusions

Facing up to the attitudes which make progress so difficult requires confronting some very deep seated taboos and prejudices. Attempts to improve outcomes which neglect the need to change underlying societal attitudes will find the achievement of significant and sustained improvement difficult or impossible.

Naturism does not directly produce improved outcomes, except amongst practitioners⁹, but it does encourage non-censorious attitudes towards the body and those attitudes do result in much better outcomes.

There is no doubt that large numbers of young people are being harmed as a result of present attitudes. It is important to appreciate just how serious the effects are. Many of the issues mentioned above result in young people dying¹⁰. Are arbitrary social mores - many would say prejudices - really worth the life of even one child or young person?

Further information on these and related topics is available from British Naturism.

1 The author taught secondary school science for 25 years.

2 Preliminary research finding and footnote 4.

3 In the absence of other medical conditions gonorrhoea is not normally fatal but other sexually transmitted infections are.

4 “*Adolescent Sexual Health in Europe and the U.S.—Why the Difference?*” Advocates for Youth. 2009.

5 Factors influencing the infant feeding decision for socioeconomically deprived pregnant teenagers: the moral dimension. L Dyson, JM Green, MJ Renfrew, B McMillan, and M Woolridge. Birth, June 1, 2010; 37(2): 141-9. University of York, UK.

6 Department of Health Press Release, 2/8/2005.

“Men & Cancer”, Ian Banks, Haynes Publishing, 2009

Many documents from NHS and related organisations.

7 For example “*How to Look Good Naked*”.

8 “End for traditional doctor's coat.” BBC news. 17/9/2007

9 All of the research that we know of shows beneficial effects with no evidence of harm other than that arising from prejudice.

10 They also result in older people dying.