

Sex law criminalises agony aunts

Stephen Goldie *Glasgow*

A new law going through parliament could result in agony aunts who give advice to teenagers being liable to prosecution. Last minute amendments to prevent this have been rejected by the House of Lords.

The Sexual Offences Bill was written in an attempt to modernise the law and tackle paedophiles who “groom” young children in internet chat rooms. The need for change was highlighted by a recent case in which a 36 year old man persuaded two 13 year olds to meet him for sex, having chatted to them online.

Due to the indiscriminate wording of the bill, however, anyone who “communicates with a child” about sex, or “causes or incites another person to engage in” an activity which breaches the Sexual Offences Bill, will be liable to prosecution. An agony aunt answering questions of a sexual nature to a child under

the age of 16 will be in breach of the law. If convicted the offender may be imprisoned for up to 14 years. The only caveat is that he or she will not have committed an offence if they are protecting the child from sexually transmitted infection, protecting the physical safety of the child, or preventing the child from becoming pregnant. Many agony aunts are interpreting this ambiguous message to mean the only advice they can give under 16s is to abstain.

“Abstinence-only education really doesn’t work. It’s inevitably going to increase sexually transmitted infections and pregnancies,” claims Petra Boynton, a non-clinical lecturer in health services research, at University College London, as well as a professional agony aunt who writes for www.mykindaplace.com.

She is concerned that those “knowledgeable enough to offer advice on sexual relationships, and who do so in an open way in a magazine, operating under strict guidance” will be banned, whereas, “those who prey on young people in a more insidious and loathsome way will probably be able to get away with it.”

Boynton thinks that “teenagers are more likely to use the media for advice on personal sex questions, particularly things they feel they can’t ask teachers, parents, or healthcare staff about”

Currently, the age of consent in the United Kingdom is 16 years. It is legal for a medical professional to give contraceptive advice to people under 16 years of age, who are deemed “Gillick competent,” thanks to the 1985 case of Victoria Gillick. This new bill will outlaw any kind of sexual contact between under 16s, but the stance on contraceptives remains.

Boynton thinks that some agony aunts may defy the ban. “I feel that young people have the right to know about sex, in a way that is honest—both positive and negative aspects. If they want to ask me, then I feel it’s my duty to tell them. You notice how nobody’s asked young people what they think.”

She believes that the vague nature of the bill is more than just coincidence when teenage magazines and sex education



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classes are the targets of abuse by the press and some sectors of the public.

An amendment was proposed by the Periodical Publishing Association, which attempts to protect non-medical people who give advice in good faith about the emotional and physical aspects of sexual relationships. This was, however, rejected by the House of Lords on the grounds that it may provide a loophole for paedophiles.

Leeds students are angry at lack of information about final results delay

Anna Ellis *studentBMJ*

Final examination results at Leeds University were delayed by eight days, it emerged recently. Final year students were told by email that allegations of cheating had been made and that their results would be published the next week, pending an investigation.

The university had been made aware of a course run by a local general practitioner and preregistration house officer, who had paid former students to remember multiple choice questions that had been in the previous year’s paper.

Final year students who had been on this course were deemed to be at an advantage, and students who had not been on the course complained.

The university marked the

paper for a second time, taking out eight questions that had been in previous papers, and the results were published the following week.

But final year student Tom Fletcher was appalled at the subsequent lack of communication between the university and the students. Three weeks ago he presented a letter to the dean of students, Professor Levene, signed by 80 final year students.

Levene wrote to Dr Andrew Catto, who is the member of staff responsible for final examinations and fifth year education, enclosing the students’ letter as well as asking for a message to be sent to the students stating the findings and conclusion of the investigation.

Fletcher said: “Eighty students and many of our parents have

written, asking to be informed about what happened, and we have heard nothing. On day one at medical school we are taught about the importance of communication skills—yet they won’t talk to us.”

Information about the revision course was originally circulated to students by the university email system, although the course was not officially sanctioned by the medical school.

A university spokeswoman said, “We are surprised by what is being suggested, as we have kept students and their representatives fully informed.”

“Serious allegations were brought to our attention by students, and an extensive investigation has taken place into all relevant issues. A full analysis by an education statistician of the results of the multiple choice paper has been carried out, from which we concluded that the circulation of eight previous questions (together with some inaccurate responses) had no effect whatsoever on the students’

final results. When the questions were omitted from the final score, nobody’s position changed, and there is no evidence whatsoever of systematic cheating.

“An interim report was presented to our MB ChB [degree] programme meeting on 7 May, where student representatives took part in a full discussion and were happy with the actions taken, and it was agreed at that meeting that a full report would be emailed to all students in due course.

“There are complex legal questions which needed clarification before going public. As we promised student representatives on 7 May, we will be publishing the full results of our investigation once we have done this, and we expect this to be very soon.”

In 1995 final year students at Leeds were forced to retake a multiple choice question paper after the 1993 paper was sent to the library by mistake. The paper was declared void and all students sat another paper, slotted between their clinical finals.