

“Conversion” therapy or just therapy?

There has been a media report that a young patient has complained to the General Medical Council, accusing a psychiatrist of attempting to “practice transgender conversion therapy” on them.

The interaction appears to reflect the ordinary questioning involved in exploratory therapy. This is described by the patient as deployment of “coercive strategies” in an attempt to “make me cis”.

The patient, a female, suddenly identified as a man at the age of 17. The patient’s mother set up an appointment for her child with psychiatrist Dr Az Hakeem to explore the reasons for this identification.

Dr Hakeem ended the Zoom call after roughly 25 minutes, saying he could not take on the patient because of closed-mindedness. The patient said their “sense of self” had been denied and mental health damaged, and that they now have regular panic attacks, crying and shaking at the memory of the interaction.

The patient complained that Dr Hakeem had raised doubts about the patient’s male identity, and had invited reflection on the long-term consequences of medical transition. Specifically, he:

- did not restrict the session to the things the patient wanted to talk about
- tried to explore the reasons for gender dysphoria “and would not accept that it’s because I’m trans”
- asked the patient to consider whether the recent, intense feelings about gender might be part of a youth subculture, which might fade
- asked the patient to consider potential negatives and drawbacks to transitioning and the possibility of future change of mind or regret
- implied it was naïve to say there wouldn’t be “much of a problem” with future relationships.

Dr Hakeem said in a statement: “I am unable to comment on any specific cases due to patient confidentiality; however I always strive to provide a neutral thinking space for my patients rather than impose any outcome on them.”

Activists campaigning to criminalise forms of talk therapy have condemned Dr Hakeem’s practice as “torture” and “abuse” on social media. Nancy Kelley, CEO of Stonewall, said the article was a “must read” on “conversion practices targeting trans people”, and was “why we need to #BanConversionTherapy”.

If standard exploratory techniques could lead to a clinician being struck off or subjected to criminal investigation, conscientious therapists will refuse to work with gender-distressed or gender-confused children. A new ban would ensure that only therapists committed to gender ideology remain in the field of gender medicine.

We urge you to reject any attempts to include gender identity in the planned legislation, and to investigate ways to protect open-minded, conscientious gender therapists from ideological attacks.

(This briefing is based on an interview with the patient in the i and at inews.co.uk: Strudwick, P (2022). ‘Shocked and scared’: Trans man speaks out over reporting psychiatrist for ‘conversion therapy’.)