

## **Director's speech for the Yorkshire MESMAC AGM November 18<sup>th</sup> 2004**

This year has been a challenging one for Yorkshire MESMAC. We have welcomed new staff, launched new services and developed new partnerships. All this against a backdrop of uncertainty and a changing internal and external environment. An environment that on one hand has become more benign, with for example, the repeal of section 28, but also in many ways an environment that has become more hostile.

It is then with a sense of pride, that I reflect on the services and support that Yorkshire MESMAC has delivered over the past 12 months.

- The hundreds of thousands of condoms and sachets of lubricants distributed;
- the hundreds of staff hours spent doing outreach to public sex environments and to the commercial Gay scene,
- the hundreds of one to one support and counselling sessions,
- the hundreds of people who have attended Yorkshire MESMAC training and conferences,
- the 50 odd groups MESMAC works with and supports,
- the thousands of helpline calls answered,
- the tens of thousands of leaflets and other health promotion materials, developed and distributed by Yorkshire MESMAC.

The substance and substantiality of our activity has been achieved through the hard work and dedication of our staff; sessional, part time, and full-time both front line and support staff. It is no exaggeration to note that they have

made a real and positive impact on the lives and environments of tens of thousands of people in Yorkshire and further afield.

- Ensuring that men have the knowledge, skills and resources to make choices about the type of sex we have.
- Working with people living with HIV to develop and deliver services that fast, fair and flexible.
- Working with people through some of the most difficult periods of their lives standing with them as they revisit and resolve painful experiences.
- Working with partner agencies pooling expertise and resources to maximise positive outcomes.
- Influencing policy and strategy so they truly reflect the needs and concerns of our communities.

I would like to thank each and everyone of you for your commitment and hard work over the years.

The staff of the organisation are supported by our Board of Trustees. Who over the years have given their time freely to ensure that the organisation can operate. Again to each of you past and present thank you, for your hard work and personal support. I would also like to take a moment to thank our funders, for their continued support over the years.

AGM's are a time for recollection and reflecting on the past 12 months and on previous years a constant theme has been the changing shape of Yorkshire MESMAC. In fact the only constant over the pass 14 years has been change and whilst change can be a difficult process it is essential that we continue to adapt the ever changing environment and needs of our communities. The

past 12 months has seen the development of two new projects both funded by Connexions West Yorkshire.

The BLAST! project working with young men and boys involved prostitution which, from its beginnings in Bradford, has been rolled out to cover all of Yorkshire MESMAC's West Yorkshire sites.

The second development has been the funding for a full time Youth worker LGBT in our Wakefield site. I'm particularly pleased by these new developments – not only because we welcomed two new highly skilled and motivated members of staff, Emma and Sarah but also because the posts serve to reaffirm our commitment to our young people, who have been failed for far too long.

Study after study has shown that young LGB youth are less likely to have their health and social care needs met than their heterosexual peers resulting in them, for example, suffering from a greater burden of mental ill-health self harm and suicide – young gay men are at particular risk from HIV infection. This is a staggering health inequality and one that we are committed to eliminating.

For us, health equity means equality of outcome, not merely of input. In fact, to achieve equity may call for targeting and an uneven distribution of resources. We do not challenge health inequalities by treating everyone the same, by assuming knowledge, or allowing our personal feeling and views to colour the type or level of service we deliver. But by recognising that we are individuals with varying, various and a variety of needs and though different all deserving parity of esteem.

It is essential then that we all listen to service users, this may seem obvious, but here are just a few reactions received by LGB young people from Yorkshire from medical staff.

**“Are you sexually active” – Yes “Do you use condoms during sex” –Girl**

**“We don’t have any gay men at this surgery” request for sexual health information from a doctors receptionist. – Boy**

**“Why do you go out traveling all day, is that how you meet men?” - Boy**

We do not challenge health inequalities, by assuming that everyone has control over their health but by recognising that there are a many factors some outside of a person control which have an effect on their health. But it is not enough to merely recognise these barriers we must take action to dismantle them. Including challenging poor practice - all too often we at Yorkshire MESMAC hear that medical staff do not discriminate, that they are able to tuck their prejudices under their white coats. Whilst the majority of staff work incredibly hard and deliver an excellent service there is still poor practice in services that needs to be challenged

***“Do you have a boyfriend” - Girl***

***“Do you have a girlfriend” - Boy***

***“Are you on the Pill?” - Girl***

***“Do you mind me asking did you catch HIV though being Gay it’s just that the consultant may ask”-Boy***

***“You’re too young to know you are a Lesbian” - Girl***

***“Do you mind not putting my HIV status in my notes doctor?” “Okay, you won’t be eligible to claim on your life insurance anyway” - Boy***

We do not challenge health inequalities by reverting back to those old tried, trusted and tired methods and structures that created the inequalities in the

first place; but by working with service users to deliver flexible services that meet their needs – not merely organisational targets.

We must work together with our allies to challenge those forces and institutions that seek to harm us. Not just those that do so overtly, but also those that do so by their collusion in maintaining the status quo. A status quo that allows everything in schools that is bad or worthless to be dismissed as gay and for that to go unchallenged. More blatantly the homophobic lyrics of much popular music that calls for the murder of Lesbians and Gay men.

Yes, I know its easy to dismiss as ‘just a saying’, or ‘it’s just a song’. But let me tell you the reality of homophobia – it begins with name calling in the playground that goes unchallenged, it becomes acceptable in popular culture, it ends up with bombs in Soho bars and gay men being kicked to death on the South Bank. The task then is to work together to challenge this. Two recent examples of Yorkshire MESMAC doing just this are the Inclusive Schools project that seeks to give schools the tools they need to broach LGB issues in a meaningful way; and the successful campaign we led locally to prevent the homophobic singer Sizzla peddling his vitriol in Bradford.