

Fundamentalism is closer than you think

Terry Maguire explains why he believes extreme views have no place in the community pharmacy

A healthy society, like a healthy culture, evolves by accommodation. When we tolerate, and eventually come to accept the views of others, we must firstly compromise our own hotly held values and principles. What we gain in social harmony we lose in cultural uniqueness. And this is right. For things to be otherwise is to encourage the rigidity and horrors of totalitarian fundamentalism.

Northern Ireland has its fair share of this. We still squabble over a 400-year-old Christian fall-out and it seeps into all aspects of life. Yet in spite of the differences between our two traditions both retain unhealthy fundamentalism. Our Health Minister has just spent a considerable amount of taxpayers' money on a case to stop homosexual people donating blood. He lost the case as the judge suggested it was "an irrational" restriction even if there was a risk (which there isn't) since Northern Ireland imports blood from other UK regions where there is no similar restriction. Failing to learn from this he proceeded to fight a legal case against gay adoption; again he lost.

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STARK CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Last year I visited Saudi Arabia (SA) on business. I had to have a sponsor acting as a kind of chaperone. Dr Esseem was Egyptian and devoutly Muslim. He was also great fun and generous to a fault. I asked, given our cultural differences, what I must do and must not do when in the sandy kingdom. Be yourself and you'll be fine he reassured me.

Yet the cultural difference between the way I live in Belfast and the way Dr Esseem lives in Riyadh is stark. For his medically qualified Egyptian wife it is starker still. She, he feels, is suffering from depression as she is unable to leave home without him. She cannot order a taxi to visit the shopping mall for example. She cannot drive. For Saudi born women, with less ambition, it might be a more comfortable existence; they certainly have their material needs well cared for.

Alcohol use in SA is a serious crime. In Belfast it is almost mandatory. Cutting someone's head off is unacceptable in any circumstance in Belfast. In Riyadh it is expected for serious crime. (Dr Esseem did tell me not to attend a Friday beheading. I gladly took this advice; seems one of his clients did attend and is still paying for therapy.)

CLOSER TO HOME

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I'm perhaps too liberal in the way I see the world but what for me is right is what is acceptable and best for the largest number.

My thoughts on this were stimulated by the arrival in my pharmacy of a questionnaire, which purports to use information I supply to map pharmacies which do not dispense/sell/deal with abortifacients/contraceptives.

It came from Human Life International (Ireland) a Catholic organisation that claims to have 14,000 supporters and who are keen to patronise only pharmacies that do not stock or supply any forms of contraception. Having failed to convince the



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profession on moral and ethical grounds it is ironic that HLI, a Catholic organisation, now chooses to influence us through our (assumed) greed for money. With 14,000 members spread across the Island of Ireland I'm not sure this tactic is powerful enough to convince many pharmacists; it certainly will not cause a rethink of my business model.

The questionnaire is supported by three testimonies from practising Irish pharmacists outlining their personal reasons for not supplying contraceptives in professional practice. One of them is Patrick McCrystal who was well known to Northern Ireland pharmacists in the late 1990s through his efforts to convince us of the error of our ways and urging us to stop supplying anything that might interfere with conception. I knew Patrick very well; I employed him for two years.

In Northern Ireland, very few pharmacists continue to uphold an extreme position on hormonal and barrier methods of contraception and in the past I have attempted to accommodate them. But a point is always reached where it just becomes impossible. Interestingly, when they take up employment, they initially don't mention the issue; it is only raised after a time and then attempts to accommodate never prove enough. I have conceded to pharmacists who wished to absent themselves from the sale of condoms and emergency hormonal contraception OTC, but the dispensing of the contraceptive pill is a Health Service requirement for my pharmacies unless I take out an exemption under the Conscience Clause. Currently no pharmacist contractor in Northern Ireland takes the Conscience Clause exemption; in 1990 only two took it. One of Patrick's key gripes back in the 1990s was that employee pharmacists were denied access to the Conscience Clause.

The current questionnaire worries me since, if pharmacists are foolish enough to respond, it could be used to target pharmacies for protests by pro-life campaigners.

Pharmacists must make a stand against this Catholic militancy, which will continue to target community pharmacy. I find it ironic, given the behaviour of some Catholic priests across Ireland in recent years, that a Catholic organisation should

lecture anyone on sexual behaviour. We can all point the finger at extreme views in others but unless we want to allow Saudi Arabian thinking to dominate here I am asking all my colleagues to bin the questionnaire.

