



## John Fryer National 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration A Teachable Moment in Civil Rights

**In 1972 John E. Fryer, M.D., a licensed psychiatrist, appeared in disguise on the Homosexuality Panel** at the American Psychiatric Association (APA) Annual Meeting. To safely testify as a homosexual without risking his career, he needed to adopt a pseudonym, wear a mask and use a voice modulator.

**In 1973 the APA declassified homosexuality as a mental illness.** In 1978, inspired by Dr. John Fryer, a group of out psychiatrists founded the Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists (AGLP). It was the first national LGBTQ professional organization.

### Background: Homophobia in 1972

- The American Psychiatric Association (APA) classified homosexuality as a mental illness in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, beginning in 1952.
  - Treatment for homosexuality included chemical castration, electric shock therapy, institutionalization and lobotomy.
- Nearly all states criminalized consensual same-sex intimacy.

- Homosexuals were among the most loathed and marginalized Americans. If outed, they were unemployable, shunned by organized religion and unwelcome in society.
  - The federal government would not employ homosexuals in any capacity.
  - Most states would not issue professional licenses (for doctors, lawyers, etc.) to homosexuals. If a person's homosexuality was discovered, their license could be revoked.
  - A business's liquor license could be revoked if more than one homosexual was found on the premises.
  - Corrupt police and court officials targeted homosexuals. Gays and lesbians were frequently entrapped and arrested.

### **Outcomes of Removing Homosexuality as a Mental Illness**

- Chemical castration, electric shock therapy, institutionalization and lobotomies were eliminated as a treatments.
- Homophobic laws and regulations could no longer be buttressed by homosexuality as a mental illness.
- Mental illness was eliminated as an impediment to the LGBTQ civil rights movement.
- Destigmatization of homosexuals and change in public perceptions began.
- *Lawrence v. Texas* (2005), the seminal U.S. Supreme Court case for LGBTQ civil rights, decriminalized same-sex intimacy in a 5-4 decision. This would have been impossible had homosexuality remained on the books as a mental disorder.
  - The holdings in *Lawrence* underpinned the U.S. Supreme Court marriage equality decisions in *United States v. Windsor* (2013) and *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015). The *Obergefell* decision legalized same-sex marriage in all 50 states.

### **About John Fryer**

Born in rural Kentucky, Fryer graduated from Vanderbilt School of Medicine. He was discharged from his psychiatry residency at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine when his homosexuality was discovered. He completed his residency at the nearby Norristown State Hospital.

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In 1972 Fryer became an untenured faculty member in the Psychiatry Department at Temple University School of Medicine.

With his testimony on the 1972 Homosexuality Panel at the APA Annual Meeting, Fryer became the first psychiatrist to publicly declare himself a homosexual. His testimony was pivotal in the APA's official declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973.

Fryer subsequently became a full professor of psychiatry and community medicine at Temple University School of Medicine.

During the AIDS epidemic, he was among the first psychiatrists to provide professional services for those with HIV/AIDS and those who had suffered loss from the epidemic.

Fryer's archives are contained in 217 boxes, housed at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

In 2006 the APA named an [annual civil rights award](#) after him.

In 2016 John Fryer was celebrated as an [LGBT History Month Icon](#).

In 2017 the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission erected a [John Fryer Historic Marker](#) in Philadelphia.

In 2018 "[217 Boxes of Dr. Henry Anonymous](#)," a play about John Fryer, written by Ain Gordon, premiered Off Broadway.

In 2021 "[CURED](#)," a documentary about John Fryer was broadcast on PBS.

**Reparative Therapy:  
Residual Homophobic Treatment Issue**

Reparative therapy, whose goal is to convert homosexuals to heterosexuals, is principally used on adolescents. While condemned by the APA, the American Psychological Association and other mental health organizations, it is allowed in 30 U.S. states.