

Dr. John Fryer, 65, Psychiatrist Who Said He Was Gay in 1972

By DUDLEY CLENDINEN

Dr. John E. Fryer, a psychiatrist who electrified his colleagues by telling the 1972 convention of the American Psychiatric Association in a mask that he was a homosexual at a time homosexuality was classified as a mental illness, died on Feb. 21 in Philadelphia. He was 65.

The cause was aspiration pneumonia, which he suffered after a degenerative lung disease, his sister Katherine F. Helmbock, said.

No gay American psychiatrist had risked speaking publicly before Dr. Fryer's appearance. When Dr. Fryer, wearing a baggy suit, a rubbery mask and a huge wig and using a microphone that distorted his voice, spoke at the association's meeting in Dallas, it was a dramatic moment in the gay rights movement, and it helped change psychiatrists' attitude toward homosexuality.

For 20 years after finding in 1952 that homosexuals were "ill primarily in terms of society and of conformity with the prevailing social milieu," the psychiatric association included homosexuality in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, an official list of mental illnesses. Though the diagnosis was based on a departure from social norms, it stamped homosexuals as emotional deviants and lent medical authority to laws that made homosexual acts and even homosexuals' public gatherings illegal.

The classification was attacked as early as 1964, when Dr. Franklin E. Kameny, an astronomer trained at Harvard who had been ostracized because of his sexuality, insisted on television that homosexuality was "not a disease, a pathology, a sickness, a malfunction or a disorder of any sort."

Not until 1971, when Dr. Kameny seized the microphone in Washington, did gay protesters confront psychiatrists at their annual convention. As a result, gay advocates were invited to a panel with psychiatrists at the 1972 convention.

Psychiatrists were not used to hearing from homosexuals who felt sane and normal. When Dr. Fryer slipped through a side curtain at the convention appearing as Dr. H. Anonymous and announcing, "I am a homosexual, I am a psychiatrist," fellow therapists were riveted.

More than 100 gay psychiatrists were at the convention, Dr. Fryer told the audience, "and several of us feel that it is time that real flesh and blood stand up before you and ask to be listened to and understood, insofar as that is possible."

His remarks were reprinted last year in *The Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy*.

The risk of speaking was real. Dr. Fryer, then an untenured faculty member at Temple University, did not formally say he was the psychiatrist behind the mask until the association's annual meeting in Philadelphia 22 years later.

"I had been thrown out of a residency because I was gay," he wrote in 1985 in the bulletin of the Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists. "I lost a job because I was gay. It had to be said. But I couldn't do it as me. I was not yet full time on the faculty."

In December 1973, after more protests and debate, the board of the psychiatric association voted to remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders and to urge that "homosexuals be given all protections now guaranteed other citizens." The members ratified the decision in April 1974.

Dr. Fryer was born in Kentucky. He graduated from Transylvania College in Lexington, Ky. At the Temple University medical school, he became professor of psychiatry. Last year, on the 30th anniversary of his speech, he received a distinguished alumnus award from the Vanderbilt University Medical School and a distinguished service award from the Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists.

He is survived by his sister.

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THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

Obituaries

John E. Fryer, 65, psychiatrist

By Rusty Pray
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

John E. Fryer, 65, a psychiatrist whose appearance as Dr. H. Anonymous before the American Psychiatric Association was a seminal moment in the history of the gay-rights movement, died Friday of aspiration pneumonia at Albert Einstein Medical Center.

He had been a resident of the Germantown section of Philadelphia for many years.

A professor emeritus of psychiatry at Temple University Medical School, Dr. Fryer appeared before the association at a meeting in Dallas in 1972 wearing a wig and full face mask. He spoke through a voice-distorting microphone to further disguise his identity.

"I am a homosexual. I am a psychiatrist," he said, galvanizing the audience and marking the first time a gay psychiatrist had spoken to colleagues in a public forum. He went on to describe to them the difficulties of trying to practice in a field that at the time listed homosexuality as a mental illness.

"It made a big difference," said gay-rights activist Barbara Gittings, who recruited Dr. Fryer for the appearance and was at the table with him when he spoke. "Here, for the first time, was a gay psychiatrist telling his colleagues why his career would be ruined if people knew he was gay.

"It opened up things a great deal, because it made many psychiatrists realize gays were not some abstract idea, but were in fact in their profession — there

was one right in front of them."

Dr. Fryer's appearance indirectly helped set the stage for the American Psychiatric Association's board of trustees in 1973 removing homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the profession's bible.

"The delisting of homosexuality removed a major obstacle in our gaining equality and full civil rights," Gittings said.

For Dr. Fryer, the appearance was "something that had to be done," he wrote in a 1985 bulletin of the Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists. "I had been thrown out of a residency because I was gay. I lost a job because I was gay. ... It had to be said, but I couldn't do it as me. ... I was not yet full time on the [Temple] faculty. I am now tenured, and tenured by a chairman who knows I'm gay. That's how things have changed."

Dr. Fryer, a native of Kentucky, was a brilliant student who graduated from high school at age 15 and earned a bachelor's degree in premed from Transylvania College in Kentucky at 19. He received a medical degree from Vanderbilt University in 1962.

Five years later, he joined the Temple faculty. He not only got his tenure, he gained full professorships in psychiatry and in family and community medicine. He retired in 2000.

Since his talk, the need for wigs and masks and voice-altering amplification has all but disappeared.

"We made the point. We made ourselves visible. And then we moved forward from there," Gittings said.

Dr. Fryer was also an accomplished musician who played the organ. For 30 years, he was organist and choir director at St. Peter's Church in Germantown.

Dr. Fryer was active in numerous organizations. He founded or helped to found Physicians in Transition, Temple's Family Life Development Center, the Institute of Religion and Science and the Philadelphia AIDS Task Force.

He was recognized many times, including in 2002 by Vanderbilt University Medical School with a distinguished alumnus award and by the Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists with a distinguished service award.

He is survived by a sister, Kathy Helmbock.

Services will be at 4:30 p.m. Friday at the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, 3820 The Oak Rd. Burial is private.

Memorial donations may be made to Manna, Box 30181, Philadelphia 19103.



John
E. Fryer

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