

The bizarre career of Dr Aubrey Levin

Robert M Kaplan

The conviction on three charges of sexual assault of male prisoners under his care has led to South African-born psychiatrist Dr Aubrey Levin (73) being sentenced to five years in jail in Calgary, Canada.¹ The trial was widely reported in Canada. Unknown to the jury and the general public was Levin's history in South Africa as the chief of psychiatry in the South African Defence Force (SADF) during the Apartheid years², something Levin had gone to considerable lengths to hide by threatening to apply Canada's defamation laws.

These events are likely to bring to an end a career path that can only be described bizarre. The story is not just one of sexual violation of patients, but an extensive pattern of state-supported human rights abuse during the Apartheid years, a highly unusual record of support of far-right causes for someone of Levin's background (Jewish) and, finally, evidence of a conflicted personality that almost defies description.

Levin achieved world-wide notoriety during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings when it was learned that he had subjected homosexuals, drug addicts, conscientious objectors and other conscripts to

brutal aversive therapy involving severe electric shocks and injection of drugs.³ However, his public profile went back much further. In 1968, Minister Connie Mulder, heading an inquiry into the laws against homosexuality, read out a letter from Levin to parliament claiming that he could “cure” homosexuality.⁴ Within a short time Levin, a newly qualified psychiatrist, was propelled to head of psychiatry in the SADF⁵, establishing himself in the ominous Ward 22 at 1 Military Hospital in Voortrekkerhoogte. Here, in an environment of coercion and intimidation, aided by a team of psychiatrists and psychologists, he carried out his work.

Levin’s training in behaviour therapy started at Tara Hospital in Johannesburg which was influenced by the work of pioneer behaviourists Joseph Wolpe and Isaac Marks. Tara psychiatrists such as Louis Freed, as far back as 1954, wrote about homosexuality and prostitution, encouraging a more realistic if not tolerant attitude.⁶ None of these tolerant and humane approaches adhered to Levin who appeared to be completely ignorant of the fact that behaviour therapy for homosexuals, as it was then done, required consensus and a non-punitive approach. What Levin called treatment was a caricature of therapy. There are many accounts of his crude and blatant treatment with electric shocks that verged on the sadistic.⁷ Levin coerced army drug users into forced labour in the remote Greefswald camp to “cure” drug addiction.⁸

In this regard, regardless of the therapeutic rationale Levin was using, by the seventies homosexuality was no longer regarded as a psychiatric illness⁹ and attempts to 'convert' people by means of behaviour therapy were abandoned.¹⁰ Even the SPNSA rejected the validity of aversion and hormone therapies (while still admitting that some of their members believed they could cure individuals of homosexuality through such therapies).¹¹ None of this had any impact on Levin's practice, which continued until well into the eighties. His abuse of patients did not stop when he left the military, but continued at Bloemfontein and Grahamstown.

In his only public response to the allegations, Levin denied that he had used a punitive approach for the aversion therapy, but followed accepted procedure used at the time.¹² This is contradicted in numerous reports from victims.

In addition, there are unresolved allegations that SADF psychiatrists subjected a number of male and female homosexuals (estimated 900) to sex change surgery, something never before done in military hospitals.¹³ This last allegation, should it be shown to be true, would put anyone shown to be responsible in a category of abuse that has not been seen since the Nazi medical abuses. Levin, it should be noted, denied organising sex-change surgery.

By the time Levin was indicted by the TRC for human rights abuse, he had fled to Calgary, Canada, going into practice in as a forensic psychiatrist, at one stage having the title of Professor. Attempts to inform the Alberta Medical Board about Levin's past were deflected on the grounds that they could not adjudicate on his actions in another jurisdiction.¹⁴ Despite Levin's threats to sue anyone publishing about his past in Canada, it is difficult to believe that his colleagues or other medical authorities would not have heard something of this; it appears no one was prepared to confront the issue. For a country like Canada, with its strong commitment to human rights, this omission awaits explanation.

Levin's story, from abusive military psychiatrist to convicted sexual offender, could only come from the pages of a Russian novel. Levin was driven by many factors, not least of which was massive over-compensation for deep conflicts over sexuality. While what he did to his many victims was tragic, there is nothing dignified in Levin's downfall, which is better encompassed by the writing of Kraft-Ebing. There was a rampant ego-mania. Levin constantly told everyone that he was not just an expert, but a world authority. Anyone who has read Levin's rather anodyne list of publications would find this claim to be tendentious. A soldier sent to Levin in the army was told that he was the most brilliant psychiatrist in the Southern Hemisphere. After he got to Canada, well aware of his notoriety

elsewhere, Levin published a paper describing himself with faux-modesty as a significant player in the field of psychopharmacology, a claim which can be strongly questioned.¹⁵

The case of Aubrey Levin highlights the widespread illusion that medical involvement in state abuse of human rights had come to an end after the Nuremberg Doctors trial in 1946.¹⁶ This could not be more incorrect; there is a long trail leading from Nuremberg to Radovan Karadzic and Aubrey Levin.¹⁷ There is one difference however between Levin and the doctors who perpetrated appalling offences in the Nazi concentration camps. Psychological studies showed that their personalities were within the normal range, albeit more narrow and restricted perhaps. The same could not be said of Levin (or for that matter, Karadzic).

Now that there would be no legal restrictions on publication of Levin's past, should the matter be allowed to rest? The answer is clearly not. Despite the lessons of the Nuremberg Doctors Trial, these events show that members of the medical profession have, apparently without regret or remorse, subverted their professional ethics to act as agents of the state and commit appalling atrocities. Levin's activities in the SADF was not just misbegotten abuse of psychiatric treatment, but driven by his well-known ideological views supporting a white supremacy agenda.¹⁸ Not one of the doctors indicted by the TRC has faced charges (with the possible exception of Dr Wouter

Basson¹⁹) and the South African medical profession, despite token expressions of regret for what occurred, has yet to come to terms with abuses during the apartheid years.²⁰

The Levin case also highlights another illusion that arose from the Nuremberg medical trials. Once the doctors were convicted, the German medical profession was left to their own devices and were the one section of German society that was never denazified.²¹ South African psychiatry has made no convincing effort to come to terms with the abuses committed by doctors over that period.²² While there is much scope for speculation about the personal motives that drove Levin, it would be nothing less than an injustice to allow the matter to be left there without taking further action. If not, it simply makes it easier the next time doctors have to make the decision whether to serve the state or adhere to their sacred medical oath.

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¹ Bill Graveland. Calgary psychiatrist who molested three court-appointed patients gets 5 years in prison. National Post, January 31.
<http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/01/31/calgary-psychiatrist-who-molested-three-court-appoint-patients-gets-5-years-in-prison/>.

² Kaplan RM. (Ed) Treatment of homosexuality during apartheid. British Medical Journal. 2004 Dec 18;329(7480):1415-6.

³ Van Zyl M, de Gruchy J, Lapinsky S, Lewin S, Reid G. *The Aversion Project: Human rights abuses of gays and lesbians in the SADF by health workers during the apartheid era*. Published by Simply Said and Done on behalf of Gay and Lesbian Archives Health and Human Rights Project, Medical Research Council, National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality. Cape Town October 1999.

⁴ Gay and Lesbian Archives, 'A. Levin to the Secretary of Parliament', 28 February 1968, Immorality Amendment Bill of 1968 (AM2656), B106.

⁵ Levin A. A FLY ON THE WALL. in Reflections on Twentieth-Century Psychopharmacology. Volume 4 (only) of the Series The History of Psychopharmacology and the CINP, as Told in Autobiography. Ban, T. A. , Healy, D., Shorter, E. (Editors). Animula Publishing House, Hungary: 2004.

⁶ Jones TF. Averting White Male (Ab)normality: Psychiatric Representations and Treatment of 'Homosexuality' in 1960s South Africa. Journal of Southern African Studies, Volume 34, Number 2, June 2008.

⁷ Kaplan RM. The Aversion Project - psychiatric abuses in the South African Defence Force during the apartheid era. SAMJ. March 2001, Vol. 91,. 3 216-7.

⁸ Kaplan R. The Aversion Project – Psychiatric abuses in the South African Defence Force during the Apartheid Era. South African Medical Journal March 2001, 90-3;216-217.

⁹ Obituary. Judd Marmor. BMJ 2004;328:466.

¹⁰ King M, Smith G, Bartlett A. Treatments of homosexuality in Britain since the 1950s—an oral history: the experience of professionals. BMJ 2004;328:429.

¹¹ GALA, Society of Psychiatrists and Neurologists of South Africa, 'Memorandum to the Select Parliamentary Committee Enquiring into the Immorality Amendment Bill', 28 March 1968, AM2656, B180.

¹² Chris McGreal. Canadian psychiatrist 'Dr Shock' stands trial on sexual abuse charges. The Guardian on-line 10 October 2012. See:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/10/canadian-psychiatrist-dr-shock-trial>.

¹³ "[Africa | Apartheid Military Forced Gay Troops Into Sex-Change Operations](#)". The Gully. 2000-08-25.

¹⁵ Levin A. *Ibid*.

¹⁶ Lifton RJ. Doctors and torture. *N Engl J Med* 2004;351:415-6.

¹⁷ Robert M Kaplan and Garry Walter. *From Kraepelin to Karadzic: Psychiatry's Long Road to Genocide*. In *Genocide Perspectives iv: Essays on Holocaust and Genocide*. Editor: Colin Tatz. The Australian Institute for Holocaust & Genocide Studies. UTSePress, 2012, 122-166.

¹⁸ Bell T, *Unfinished Business: South Africa, Apartheid & Truth*. Redworks Observatory 2001; page 175.

¹⁹ "South Africa: Walter Basson to answer misconduct case". *BBC*. 27 January 2012.

²⁰ Van der Linde I. Sometimes having to say you're sorry [News]. *South African Medical Journal* 1995;85:715-716.

²¹ Pross C. Breaking through the postwar cover up of Nazi doctors in Germany. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 1991, 17, Supplement 13-16.

²² Gillis LS, Nash ES. Psychiatry under scrutiny—the Society of Psychiatrists in the apartheid years. *S Afr J Psychiatry* 2002;8:7-11.