

Who said pornography was acceptable in the workplace?

An investigation into
the use of pornography
by NHS fertility clinics

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1. Introduction

Every so often we hear of a council worker, a judge or a teacher – someone in a position of trust and authority - being sacked for viewing pornography at work. Pornography is still considered unacceptable in the work environment, and should be illegal. The Obscene Publications Act was designed to convey the message that it is unacceptable full stop, but the lack of prosecutions would imply that we have been feeble at enforcing this. Not surprisingly, both because of ease of availability and a largely permissive culture, we have an alarming amount of graphic images that would imply a major disconnect. Is it that in our anti-censor society we have forgotten the negative impact on men, women and children of such material? Or have we subconsciously accepted the pornographer's line that porn is just another word for sex and we dismiss the evidence base for pornography both encouraging aggressive, debasing treatment of women and being a causative factor in the hyper-sexualisation of our culture?

Either way, the workplace should be a location in which we can work in a safe and healthy environment, where our dignity is not threatened and we feel respected. The presence of pornography would compromise this.

2. An unauthorised shift

What has happened across many NHS hospitals in the UK is that some public sector employees have been buying and supplying and thus endorsing pornography in the workplace. We surveyed all health Trusts in England to find to what extent this was happening. Yet we know of no government authorisation that sanctioned this, or exception to any NHS Trust's employment terms that allow staff to have pornographic material at work. The Trust should also have an "Acceptable Computer Usage Policy" which explicitly forbids the viewing of indecent images by staff and surely implies that any pornographic images viewed at work is unacceptable.

The rationale for the use of pornography in a fertility clinic is that where a man needs to provide a sample of sperm, he needs the assistance of pornographic images to do so. This is patently untrue. This is verified by the fact that although we found the statistic of 36% of NHS fertility clinics supplying pornography, conversely 64% of them do not. There is no evidence that the latter cannot obtain any specimens. In fact, there is no reason why a specimen cannot be produced at home¹ and brought to the clinic, just as other specimens are, so the use of hospital space in the clinic for specimen collection is in itself wasteful. It's also worth considering what the NHS, by supplying porn, is effectively suggesting to a man that rather than thinking about his partner, he should sexually objectify an unknown woman while producing a specimen.

2.1 The impact on women

Pornography strips women of full human status and reduces them to sex objects². It gives permission to its consumers to treat women as they are treated in porn. And the reality of porn today is that it increasingly uses

younger girls and is more violent and extreme. 77% of the NHS workforce in the UK is female³ and they should never have to work in an environment that endorses pornography, whether directly or indirectly. Added to this, the surgically enhanced women often portrayed in porn media no longer resemble the normal female form, and the gap between the reality of a woman's body and the fantasy portrayed leaves men and women less able to connect⁴. Isn't it a categorical duty of the NHS to promote healthy attitudes towards body and mind?

That no one allowed the demeaning impact on female staff to override any spurious claim that this material was necessary, is an indictment of the managers of those fertility clinics⁵.

2.2 Abuse of taxpayer's money

On the whole, most NHS Trusts spent a small amount of money on pornographic material, with the notable exception of the Royal Liverpool Women's NHS Foundation Trust⁶ who frittered £7,350 on a media suite for watching pornographic DVDs. This use of taxpayer's money is a clear violation by NHS staff, especially in times of severe cuts, of the good faith with which money is allocated. The sums may be small, but the principle is important.

1. One patient told us when he arrived at a clinic and asked whether he had to use the on-site facilities, he was told that he could go home and produce a sample there.

2. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/jul/02/gail-dines-pornography>

3. <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/NHS60/Pages/Didyouknow.aspx>

4. http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/trends/n_9437/index1.html

5. One nurse told us that she had simply been told to put up with it; however one consultant told us that he had material removed that had been brought in by others.

6. <http://www.thefirstpost.co.uk/66358,news-comment,news-politics,fertility-clinic-unveils-7500-porn-suite> and in response to our FOI.

2. An unauthorised shift

2.3 The impact on men

For the NHS to unnecessarily introduce addictive material - a medium that is implicated as causing difficulties forming intimate relationships - to patients during their treatment beggars belief. And to do this at a time when men are particularly vulnerable, already facing the emotional and physical pressures of possible infertility, is inexcusable.

2.4 Manipulation by the sex industry

In some cases the pornographic material was donated by a publisher. This raises the concern that the NHS has been taken advantage of by publishers of porn who know the addictive nature of their material and have seen the potential for capturing a new market.

2.5 Violation of NHS constitution.

Several sections of the NHS Constitution point to an ethos in the NHS which should guarantee an individual's dignity and respect, whether they are patients or staff, and probity around expenditure.

e.g. Patient Rights:

2a Respect, consent and confidentiality: **You have the right to be treated with dignity and respect**, in accordance with your human rights.

e.g. Principles underpinning core values:

No 3. The NHS aspires to **the highest standards of excellence and professionalism.**

No 6. The NHS is committed to **providing best value for taxpayers' money** and the most effective, fair and sustainable use of finite resources.

3. Conclusion

This isn't the first publicity about the use of pornography in the NHS. But what is staggering is that the only objection to date seems to have been that tax payers' money was used. No reference has been made to the humiliation for the staff, the implied sanctioning of pornography in the workplace, the fostering of unhealthy attitudes towards the opposite sex, the encouragement of 'adultery of the mind', and the impact of the addictive nature of porn. Isn't the public sector being inconsistent in its 'values' in not challenging this?

The public sector workplace should be a leading and inspiring example of a safe and healthy environment, which elevates the dignity and respect of both men and women. The presence of pornography compromises this and the government should send a clear message to the public by moving to ban pornography in NHS fertility clinics immediately.

Methodology

To determine the extent of the use of pornography in the NHS, and the spend on these services we contacted 160 Acute trusts and Foundation trusts to submit a freedom of information request.

The following questions were asked:

- 1. Does the fertility department provide (or has the department in the past provided) pornographic material for patient use?**
- 2. If yes then what forms of material are available (e.g videos, magazines)?**
- 3. And from which suppliers?**
- 4. How much is spent on pornography a year by the institute (statistics for each of the past 5 available years if possible)? And how much of this is public and private funding?**

Responses to these questions were then collated into a spreadsheet.

Results

Of the 160 acute trusts and foundation trusts which were contacted 140 responded within the time frame. Of these 48 stated that they did not provide fertility services. Of the remaining 92 trusts, 33 reported the use of pornography in their clinics.

Two types of pornographic material were used; magazines and DVDs. All trusts reporting the use of pornography reported the use of magazines, whereas only 6 clinics provided DVDs for their patients to use, together with the appropriate viewing equipment.

In 15 trusts, pornographic material was obtained free of charge. This was usually either through donations of material by patients (6 cases) or publishers (5 cases). Other free sources included donation by a consultant and loan from a private clinic.

The remaining trusts purchased their material, with 15 trusts purchasing material from newsagents, and 2 trusts purchasing direct from publishers (e.g Paul Raymond). One trust remained where the supplier was unclear. DVDs were purchased from Ann Summers or Hidden Pleasures.

The spend on magazines per year ranged from £0, when magazines were donated, to £100. The average spend on magazines was £21.32 per trust per year. The spend on DVDs was in a similar range. The cost of the equipment needed to use the DVDs was generally not reported, however one trust reported a total spend of £7350 on video installations for the principal purpose of viewing pornography.

Excluding the spend on viewing equipment, the total estimated spend by NHS on pornography per year was £700.