

UNFAIR GAME

Do we need new 'incest taboos' to protect psychiatric patients and disabled people?

As a working Christian minister I am becoming increasingly uneasy about certain groups in our society who are vulnerable to predators with nothing in mind except their own pleasure or profit. The two groups who have come to my attention are people in psychiatric wards and those with disabilities in the community.

I wonder whether, in our anxiety to avoid the charges of being 'judgmental' or of robbing our patients/clients/residents/friends of their freedom to 'make their own decisions', we are in fact dodging our responsibility to ask how much 'freedom' is involved on the part of the main person we should be caring for.

Sex on the psychiatric ward

Take the issue of an attractive young wife and mother, suffering from severe depression. She has been told by her husband he no longer loves her and wishes he had not married her. Friends in the church (for they are both Christians) suspect that the marriage may be saved - with counselling. Meanwhile, her self-esteem is in tatters.

Women in these sorts of situations sometimes wonder if they give off 'vibes' a certain kind of man can read from 100 yards. She discovers she is the target of unwanted sexual attentions, even from men friends and acquaintances whom she would never have imagined making advances. Regrettably, even so-called Christian men are involved. She tells me she feels that written on her forehead is: 'F--- me, I'm miserable'!

She goes into a psychiatric ward where they feel no responsibility to stand in the way of patients 'having relationships'. She ends up getting involved with someone even sicker than she is. It does her no good at all. It is many painful months before she disentangles herself, with some firm and loving help from Christian friends.

A specialist in eating disorders recently told me there was a time when she would not hesitate to pop some of her young patients into a quiet psychiatric ward for a few days. No way, now. They would be taken advantage of straight away. Thin little things with big eyes and no self-esteem? They wouldn't stand a chance.

Care in the community?

The second situation concerns those 'in the community' in a care home of some kind. It is not unusual for some residents to start sleeping together and for the staff to take no steps to prevent this. But no-one seems to take responsibility for checking this really is a free and informed choice on both sides. There is no provision for counselling about consequences and other choices. I cannot imagine what it must be like to be a Christian parent with a child in such a place - or destined to go into one when the parents are no longer able to care.

Will Christians have to set up 'special' homes where different standards prevail? If so, would the residents be able to take the management to court on the grounds of abuse of their 'human rights' if they were restrained from sleeping with whom they wanted? The mind boggles.



I married a couple recently. The man was disabled. He had met the woman, older than him, when she came to work as a cook in the home. They began a 'relationship' and were promptly provided with a double room. In the light of their subsequent history, I came to doubt her motives. I suspected she thought of him as her 'meal ticket' with his nice disability allowances. There did not seem anyone available to take responsibility for him.

Even more, those who live in the community in their own accommodation may be considered 'easy pickings' for the predatory. They get somewhere to live, a sexual partner and quite a lot else - for what? The price of a bit of flattery. But then, what? When the relationship grows stale, or becomes abusive, there is misery. If the predatory partner takes off, she or he leaves behind feelings of loss compounded with the low esteem those with disability and health problems can have anyway.

As a taxpayer, am I happy at the thought of merited allowances being taken advantage of by those who are doing the vulnerable no good at all? Am I sponsoring short-term, unsatisfactory relationships that will in the end produce situations needing even more tax-payer's money to sort out?

Name and address supplied