

Program: Sexuality and Aging – Embracing Change

Speaker: William Yarber, HSD, Health Education, Indiana University; Senior Scientist, The Kinsey Institute Provost Professor, School of Public Health-Bloomington; Senior Director, Rural Center for AIDS/STD Prevention.

Introduced by: Marty Meisenheimer

Attendance: 127

Guests: Norma Wallman, Jo Davis

Scribe: J. Mark Michael

Editor: Ed Nitka

The Sciencetech presentation on 6/17/2019 was titled “Sexuality and Aging: Embracing Change.” Our speaker was Dr. William L. Yarber, a senior researcher at the Kinsey Institute, which was founded by Alfred Kinsey at Indiana University in 1947 and supported by IU president Herman Wells against early opposition. Kinsey published a book titled “Sexual Behavior in the Human Male” in 1948, and it was followed by “Sexual Behavior in the Human Female” in 1953.

Dr. Yarber pointed out that sexuality is ubiquitous but often confusing due to conflicting and changing cultural messages and multiple components such as physiology, cultural aspects, ethical dimensions, and psychological considerations.

Cultural aspects include when sexual behavior might be approved (marriage a prerequisite), lower or upper age limits?, same sex interactions?). Ethical issues are currently much discussed due to the #metoo movement; what constitutes sexual coercion? Psychological considerations include our acceptance of and adaptation to the physiological changes that occur as we age. Mind over matter may play a significant role in maintaining sexual function.

What is considered healthy sexuality is affected by what is considered “normal.” Normality can be defined subjectively, idealistically, statistically, culturally, and/or clinically. Terminology is important in these hyper verbal times, so “typical vs. atypical” might be less judgmental than “normal vs. abnormal.” Dr. Yarber considered the ability to communicate about sex and to be open to diversity important in fostering good sexual health. Distinguishing one’s personal sexual feelings from those widely taught in a culture can lead toward a better personal sexuality as well as increased acceptance of less typical sexualities such as homosexuality.

Much of our objective understanding of sexuality has been derived from the interview techniques that Kinsey pioneered. Dr. Yarber presented entertaining video interviews that displayed biases about age of peak sexual performance, age of last (safe) sexual performance, and age when attractiveness disappears. He also showed interesting data on what is considered “having sex” including differences between men’s and women’s answers. He emphasized that despite the loss of our acrobatic abilities as we age, both men and women appear to have a fairly stable desire to have sexual interaction of one sort or another throughout life.

The talk concluded with the assurance that many older individuals enjoy sexual relations in a variety of forms, free from worries about pregnancy or embarrassment with an unfamiliar partner. Even so, STD (formerly known as VD) and those heart attacks, about which the young video interviewee was worried, are still possibilities, so prudence is always indicated.



Dr. William Yarber