

Origins of the *No Known Cure* Myth

Originally posted April 2012

An Overview Prepared by Advocates for Change

There is no clear path tracing the development of the “no known cure” concept. Although frequently quoted by legislators, administrative agencies, treatment providers, and researchers alike, no explicit support ever seems to be provided for the idea. It is simply asserted that “research” shows there is “no cure” for sex offending, but the meaning of this assertion is not explained, and no such research is cited.

It is clear, however, that during the 1960s and '70s a powerful and prominent victims' rights movement developed in the United States. Due to unique political and social factors not seen in other Western countries, this movement became highly retributive and punitive in orientation, despite research showing that retribution and stronger law enforcement did not address the primary needs of the victims themselves. This movement was co-opted by penal conservatives and law enforcement advocates, who found it to be a powerful tool in their campaign for stiffer criminal laws and penalties, and the expansion of the prison system. For an excellent treatment of this phenomenon see Marie Gottschalk, “The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America.”

The segment of this victims' rights movement which focused on sexual offenses used the same techniques as the wider movement to secure legislation and funding. They sought to frame the issue as a zero-sum game in the public mind, pitting the rights of victims against the rights of offenders. In particular, the movement publicized dramatic horror stories of victims' experiences, and highlighted the most heinous sexual crimes as representative of the behavior of sex offenders as a whole.

This approach was successful in generating a high level of public fear, and calls for action from legislators and law enforcement to protect society from the perceived threat. Legislators and other government agencies began to examine the sparse research on sex offending in order to determine a course of action. This led to an increase in research being conducted on the subject of individuals and organizations with ties to, or receiving funding from, criminal justice and law enforcement agencies.

The few available recidivism studies on sex offenders indicated that there was no form of treatment in use at the time which completely eliminated sexual recidivism. Since researchers found no approach to be 100% effective, the phrase came into being that there was “no cure” for sex offending behavior.

The coalition of the victims’ rights movement and various proponents of “get tough” penal policies seized on this language, and began to trumpet it as proof that much more severe criminal penalties and longer prison sentences were needed for sex offenders. As the terminology was adopted to push this agenda, its meaning quickly transformed. The phrase “no cure” came to communicate the idea that all sex offenders, left to themselves, would eventually re-offend, rather than the idea that recidivism could not be completely eliminated. “No cure” began to be associated in the public mind with the idea of a physiological cause for sex offending, such as a genetic abnormality, which was innate and could not be corrected. Naturally, such abnormal individuals would have to be contained indefinitely by the criminal justice system in order to protect society.

Self-styled sex offender treatment “experts,” many of whom had been complicit in the distorted evolution of the “no cure” concept, perceived a unique opportunity. They adopted the extremist form of the “no cure” philosophy, and used it as a justification to persuade legislators of the necessity of adopting life-long systems of mandatory treatment and supervision for sex offenders.

These treatment experts thus succeeded in legislating an entire sex offender treatment industry into existence. Laws requiring lifetime treatment of sex offenders, on the basis that they could not be “cured” but only “contained” or “managed,” gave rise to the proliferation of large and powerful sex offender treatment programs with an expanding base of clients who had no choice but to pay for their services. The heads of these programs became very influential in the field of sex offender management. As the recognized “experts” in the field, these treatment providers came to have a huge impact on legislation and policy relating to sex offenders. They were able to secure additional funding to conduct their own research, which unsurprisingly reinforced the need for their programs’ continued existence.

The position of such treatment programs toward the “no cure” philosophy is exemplified in the following paragraphs from the treatment contracts of a treatment provider, formerly lead by Greg Veeder in Denver, Colorado.

I will learn to live my life in accordance with, and based on, the policy that there is no known cure for being an adult sex offender. This policy means, at a minimum, the adult sex offender remains an on going threat to the community. (Offense-Specific Treatment Contract, p. 4).

Under Veeder, it was the company's belief that a client who learns to live a "no cure" lifestyle will continue to value external forms of monitoring and control [...] I will accept external monitoring and control as a necessity for life, regardless of the length of my sentence. (Basic Rules and Expectations of Clients, pp. 1, 3).

This powerful sex offender treatment establishment, was firmly entrenched and allied with the victims' rights movement and proponents of harsher penal policies, worked to sustain this status quo by several means: First, by distorting, ignoring, or suppressing the growing body of current research indicating extremely low rates of recidivism for sex offenders – one of the lowest rates of any type of crime. To admit the validity of this research would severely undermine the "no cure" concept. Second, seizing on egregious, high-profile sex offense cases in the media, it sought to maintain public fear and extreme punitive sentiment, equating all sex offenders with the offenders in such cases. The "no cure" language was used to convey the suggestion that all sex offenders will do the same things. (For example, the horrifying case of Jaycee Dugard is said to prove that sex offenders cannot be "cured," and will all inevitably commit similar crimes if give the chance.) In the application of the "no cure" concept no distinctions among individual offenders are recognized.

The heightened level of public fear and outrage created by this spin and disinformation benefits all member of the coalition. The punitive victims' rights movement and other advocates of increased criminalization and imprisonment achieve their goals of more severe punishments and longer terms of incarceration. At the same time, the sex offender treatment "experts" ensure an ongoing flow of cash and clients to support the treatment and containment industry that has grown up around sex offenders.

These techniques have thus far been spectacularly successful. The effect of all this on public perception is exemplified in the following quotes, selected from various blogs which appeared upon conducting a Google search of the terms "sex offender" and "no cure" on January 29, 2010:

“FIRST time sex offenders should get life since there is NO KNOWN CURE for a pedophiles’ sexual attraction to children.”

“The only known cure is a stake through the heart or castration.” (Comparing sex offenders to vampires.)

“There is NO CURE for a pedophile other than a third eye from a .44 Magnum...”

In a recent article Dr. Bill Marshall, professor of psychology and psychiatry and sex offender treatment authority, as quoted as saying that no one is born a sex offender. “These are learned behaviors and like any learned behavior you can unlearn it.” In response to this one man wrote, “This guy’s in cuckoo land – a .22 is the only cure!” This is the legacy of the “no cure” philosophy. Until someone is willing to stand up, point to the actual recidivism research, and call the philosophy what it is – an empty, nonsensical political buzzword with no scientific foundation whatsoever – the public will continue to be misled and offenders mistreated. (The treatment industry and prison system, however, will no doubt thrive.)

Advocates for Change
PO Box 103392
Denver CO 80250

Phone: **(720) 329-9096**
Email: advocates4changeafc@gmail.com