

## Is it Necessary?

by Lesley Dawson

It is so difficult to admit one is wrong. Particularly when one has been wrong for a very long time.

The basis of this wrong was cultural imperialism on my part. It happened this way. Physiotherapy students need to practice techniques on each other before experimenting on patients. Up to this point we had stuck with the cultural norms and kept practical classes single sex. Also, practical assessments in which students had to lay hands on other students to demonstrate their practical expertise had been single sex.

We had spent a lot of time and effort choosing these students, the first to study for a degree in this profession and had determined we wanted fifty, fifty males and females. Students came from all four corners of the Palestinian territories, including Gaza. The group was diverse, from strict religious Muslims from Gaza and Nablus to other less religious Muslims who were very modern and dressed in western clothes. The few Christians were swallowed up in the mixture.

I had become increasingly concerned that all students should be able to treat both men and women and had raised the scenario with them of a male patient in pain coming to a clinic and the only professionals on duty being female. We had all agreed (so I thought) that it was not acceptable to leave the man in pain.

My bright idea was that at the assessments coming up we would use one of the more secular boys to model for all the student assessments, both male and female. This would save a lot of time and effort. He was very willing and I thought we had agreement that this could go ahead. The morning of the exam I arrived full of enthusiasm for this new approach, believing we had encouraged our students to move forward in their thinking. It was with a sinking heart I found a notice on the classroom door to the effect that the students were on strike. They had all signed their names, including the Christians.

Our two Palestinian Muslim male staff went to attempt an accommodation. It appeared that the previous evening, the Muslim students had checked at the local mosque and were told these things was only acceptable if necessary for learning or healing. We argued it was necessary but the strictest Muslim student, known by his classmates as “the Sheik,” was arguing that we did not determine what was necessary but the students themselves did. Even the Christian students were involved, they were all Orthodox, whose values were more like Islamic ones than western Christians.

When I had calmed down enough to think straight, I remembered a conversation with a Pakistani colleague in the UK, before I had gone to Bethlehem. She had said then, “of course, you will need single sex classes and they will not be allowed to lay hands on their male classmates. Muslim women, especially, are not allowed any form of intimacy with men of their own age who are not close family members.”

Perhaps because I had been plied with a couple of large glasses of red wine, I was not just optimistic, but quite arrogant that I would be able to change mind sets. She just smiled quietly and allowed me my moment of triumph.

Looking back, I realized that my behaviour was at least racist, at worst imperialist. Everything I had always deplored. It was something I had been wrong about for a very long time and needed to rethink my attitudes.