

And the winner is ... the Brook/FPA UK Sexual Health Awards 2013

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BACKGROUND

Even at the best of times, we work in a profession that isn't as appreciated as it could be. If we aren't being pilloried by the popular press for what they see as a world in moral decline, then we are being scapegoated by the political parties for what they see as failure to keep health statistics sufficiently election-worthy. And right now – in what one might call the worst of times when it comes to funding, resourcing and health service stability – we can feel very short on recognition, which is why the recent introduction of an annual UK Sexual Health Awards ceremony is such good news. A joint venture by British sexual health charities Brook and the Family Planning Association (FPA), the 2012 Awards were the inaugural event, and the 2013 Awards took place in March of this year.

WHY THE AWARDS?

Both organisations had traditionally presented awards, in small ceremonies throughout each year. But 2 years ago, the organisations decided to both combine and reinvent their awards system, as well as their respective annual gala dinners, to present a joint, award-driven evening.

The impetus for the shift was not simply to have a knees-up. The agenda was and is much more complex – and in my opinion well-informed – than that. The current economic climate that makes it imperative to have events even more focused and cost-effective than before; the increasing awareness that grass roots rather than the 'great and the good' should be the central focus of any gathering; and the desire to make a strong statement of achievement to the outside world as well as the abovementioned wish to celebrate that achievement internally.

So, taking as the foundation the existing awards, and adding a few new ones such as a Community Pharmacy Award

and the Lifetime Achievement Award (see Box 1 for a full list of this year's awards), Brook and the FPA designed an event that reflected these agendas. Held at a restored pre-war 'grand cinema' in East London; comprising a simple but satisfying meal; involving several supportive celebrities but centred firmly around the awardees, the evenings have – I speak from personal experience – been both entertaining and moving. As shortlist after shortlist is announced; as table after table cheers for their favourite; as winner after winner ascends the stage steps to receive their prize, the clear message is that sexual health professionals are doing a good job.

FOREPLAY

That said, for me the culminating ceremony has not been the only important thing about these awards. And here I need to admit my involvement: I myself have been an award judge for three previous events. And while – to use a not-inappropriate metaphor – the 'climax' celebration has given me great pleasure, the 'foreplay' of the awards process and the 'afterglow' of the impact on its winners have inspired me just as much.

When it comes to the 'foreplay' – application, shortlisting and judging – the process begins with what can only be described as an 'APB' to sexual health workers in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Given little to no marketing or advertising budget the message is spread, sometimes literally, by word of mouth to sexual health networks, associated organisations, members of the Faculty of Sexual & Reproductive Healthcare, key opinion formers in the field, and to the health press. The message is simple: tell us about folk who are doing a wonderful job, whose work needs to be recognised, profiled and feted.

Thereafter, of course, the response from potential nominees absolutely reflects the

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Box 1 2013 UK Sexual Health Awards winners

- ▶ **Sexual Health Professional of the Year** – presented by Dianne Abbott MP; won by Kate Bulman, Oakhill Secure Training Centre, Milton Keynes.
- ▶ **JLS Young Person of the Year** – presented by Marvin Humes; won by Muna Hassan, Integrate Bristol.
- ▶ **Adult Sexual Health Service/Project of the Year** – presented by Zoe Margolis; won by the West London Centre for Sexual Health in partnership with the West London African Women's Service for their Female Genital Mutilation Service.
- ▶ **The Pamela Sheridan Young People's Sexual Health Service/Project of the Year** – presented by Luke Meredith; won by Teenage Pregnancy and Sexual Health Outreach, Croydon.
- ▶ **Rosemary Goodchild Award for Excellence in Sexual Health Journalism** – presented by Trevor Goodchild; won by Louise Tickle writing in *The Guardian* for 'Who is looking after the sexual health and wellbeing of young people in care?'.
- ▶ **Sexual Health Media Campaign/Storyline of the Year** – presented by Tracey Cox; won jointly by the HIV-HOP Campaign, Centre for HIV and Sexual Health Sheffield and by Teenage Rape Prevention Campaign, Home Office.
- ▶ **Durex Community Pharmacy Award** – presented by Dr Cathal Coyle; won by Benjamin Chemist, Hackney, London.
- ▶ **Lifetime Achievement Award** – presented by Ann Furedi (bpas); won by Professor Wendy Savage.

Further details of the 2013 award winners can be found at: <http://www.brook.org.uk/index.php/uk-sexual-health-awards-2013>.

typical attitude of those on the front line: in short, they get shy. For it is hugely difficult for those doing good work to recognise and admit that their work is good. So after the call goes out, there is what one might call a nationwide blush as individuals and organisations hold back from coming forward. How can we apply – we're only doing our jobs? How can we big ourselves up – we achieve so little? So, may I add a little reassurance here for anyone considering applying in future years: the FPA and Brook not only issue clear guidelines on the application process but will actively hand-hold throughout it. You don't need to sell yourselves; simply say what you do and how you do it – that will often be more than enough for a win.

CLIMAX

From the applications, Brook and the FPA then draw up a shortlist. It's an informed one, not merely picking the best applicants but maintaining awareness

Box 2 2013 UK Sexual Health Awards winners' comments

- ▶ **Winner of the Sexual Health Media Campaign/Storyline of the Year** – "Thank you again – we were really proud and humbled. Thank you to everyone involved in making the awards such a success."
- ▶ **Winner of the Sexual Health Professional of the Year** – "This award is such an opportunity to raise the profile of working with young men at risk ... around the issues of parenting and fatherhood."
- ▶ **Winner of the Adult Sexual Health Service/Project of the Year** – "As a result of the award ... our service has received a huge amount of positive feedback and interest."

that like cannot be compared with like; a tiny support group in the back of beyond can't – and isn't expected to – achieve the wide-range of a nationwide television programme funded by the might of a broadcasting corporation. But if, given those parameters, the group does more than the programme does, then it will be shortlisted (and it will probably win!).

Shortlist compiled, judges are then chosen. What are the qualifications for such judges? I certainly know that there is a total commitment to having on the judging panel for each award a wide cross-section of viewpoints, a heavy emphasis on the target market, a representative of the two organisations and in some cases the winner of the previous award. I would also like to think that the further criteria for choice are that judges also bring to the process clear-thinking, good judgement and dedication to the cause – though as a judge myself, I would say, that wouldn't I?!

Judges read the applications, where relevant view the audio-visual presentations, then talk, preferably face-to-face but if not by phone, and typically under the guidance of a 'head judge' – think Len Goodman but for sexual health. My own experience in 2013 was a perfect model of good decision-making: an hour spent in conference call with a sexual health professional and two young people already involved in outreach work with the organisations. We didn't come to a clear decision right away, there was some wonderfully healthy pushing back on both sides, and by the end we were all absolutely congruent with our mutual conclusion.

Decisions made, shortlisted entrants notified – the winners only get to know at the announcement itself – preparations continue. It's a measure of the support the event gathers in the profession that not only short-listed applicants but also nominees and their supporters – as well as huge numbers of sexual health professionals who have no thought of nomination – all attend, to meet, to greet, to hug, to laugh, to applaud their colleagues and to celebrate themselves.

AFTERGLOW

But actually, when the awards have been given out, the toasts have been drunk and the event itself is receding into distant memory, the next important phase is only just beginning. This is because in the 'afterglow', the impact – in particular on both winners and those shortlisted – can't be overestimated. At a private level, having been recognised in this way raises self-esteem, focuses awareness on past achievement, and motivates for the future. At a public level, involvement brings increased recognition and sometimes – even in these straitened times – increased funding. Brook and the FPA have plans afoot to try to maximise the post-ceremony impact in future years, to support organisations and individuals to build on their awards success, but even now it is considerable. Box 2 contains some quotes from 2013 winners that give a flavour of how much winning an award means to them.

The final messages from me are these. First, if any Journal readers or their organisations are eligible for the 2014 awards, then please enter, because, as I hope I've shown, they'll benefit you hugely, will show the way for others and will showcase the sexual health field as a whole.

Second, and for all the same reasons, if any Journal readers know of any individuals or organisations that are eligible, then please do encourage them to enter the 2014 awards. (The categories for the 2014 awards can be found at <http://www.brook.org.uk/index.php/uk-sexual-health-awards-2013>.)

Third, if any Journal readers are reading this from countries other than the UK that do not have parallel sexual health awards, may I strongly suggest that they consider launching some; they will do you nothing but good.

Finally, of course, if any Journal readers have been involved in organising the awards, give yourselves a pat on the back. They are a wonderful and welcome highlight of the sexual health year. Long may they continue!

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