Chapter 14

A Sex-Information Switchboard

MARGO RILA AND JUDITH STEINHART

EDITOR'S NOTE

The hot line is an innovative attempt to provide information and support in a relevant and reassuring setting. There is personal contact, unlike the impersonality of the television set; specific questions can be asked and answered; and anonymity protects the caller from embarrassment or fear of punishment. Some communities are making use of this device to provide sex education and a nonjudgmental referral source.

Although the San Francisco group whose brief report follows had limited funds and minimal publicity, in the first year and a half of 3-to-9 pm operation, over 10,000 calls were received.

San Francisco Sex Information is a five-year-old nonprofit volunteer organization that gives free, nonjudgmental sex information and referrals to its anonymous callers. The original founders of SFSI, Toni Ayres, Carolyn Smith, and Maggi Rubenstein, recognized the importance of accurate information concerning sexuality, specifically women's sexuality. They also perceived the need for an anonymous sex-education service that would reach people who might not ordinarily attend a course or a workshop. From their work as sex educators, counselors, and therapists, they identified the relationship between information about sexuality and people's attitudes.

Before volunteers answer any calls, they are required to partici-
pate in an intensive 40-hour training program. The program is based in part on the Sexual Attitude Restructuring process developed by the National Sex Forum, which has been training professionals as well as the general public in sex education, counseling, and therapy for the past 10 years. The National Sex Forum states that appropriate topics for a program in sex education consist of "what people do and how they feel about it."

The three components of SFSI training include:

- Didactic and personal presentations
- Use of explicit sex-educational material produced primarily by the National Sex Forum
- Communication and small-group sharing

Disclosure of personal experiences and lifestyles contributes to the educational process of both trainees and staff. They learn not only to view themselves and one another as valuable resources, but also to appreciate each other's unique experiences and choices.

Women have played the primary role in the development of SFSI. Training has always been planned and conducted primarily by women, and over half the trainees are women. Consequently, a feminist and egalitarian perspective affirms a woman's right to be sexual, affects the ways that male volunteers and callers relate to women, and encourages both men and women to be themselves, with their own individual wants and needs. In addition, the training presents homosexuality and bisexuality along with heterosexuality as equally valid sexual options and lifestyles.

The training has evolved over the five years and has changed to fit the needs of the callers. The training reflects the proportion and the kind of calls the switchboard receives. The topics include:

- The history of sex research
- The sexual response cycle
- Fantasy
- Masturbation
- Heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality
- Venereal disease
- Child and adolescent sexuality
- Sex and aging
- Lifestyles, including group sex, open relationships, celibacy
- Sadism and masochism
- Oral sex
- Anal sex
- Birth control and abortion