Martin Cole

Pioneering sexologist who shocked Britain with the education film Growing Up

The sight in 1971 of a teacher pleasuring herself in the sex education film Growing Up sparked public outrage. The Archbishop of Canterbury declared the 23-minute colour film "anti-Christian", Lord Longford said it was pornography, and Margaret Thatcher, the education secretary, decided to attend the viewing in the Palace of Westminster, during which the Division bell sounded mid-film. No one moved, and a voice was heard to cry "there's a divison in the Lords", to which the immediate riposte came "there's a cleavage in the Commons". Another disgusted critic, Elaine Kellett-Bowman, the Conservative MP for Lancaster, walked out of the screening, declaring, "I would shoot that man."

"That man," the film's director, Dr Martin Cole, was a British sexologist quite unabashed by the controversy. Growing Up was simply part of his long campaign to rid the British public of sexual hang-ups, guilt and fear. The film was unique in using adults rather than drawings, and it was groundbreaking in showing genitalia, and full-frontal nudity, but Cole's aim was to "bridge the gap between pornography and straightforward sex education. The Daily Mirror described it as "the most explicit and frank film ever made for use in schools."

Few children - at least in the 1970s - would have known of the morality campaigner Mary Whitehouse, who rallied opposition in Birmingham, where Cole lived, the council voted en masse to ban the film. The councillor protested that its broadcast would lead to "people copulating in the streets and dogs throwing water on them". As for the masturbatory 23-year-old married teacher - who taught liberal studies - she lost her job, and the tabloid press quickly conferred the moniker "Sex King Cole" on its director.

Asked decades later if he had enjoyed the notoriety, Cole grinned and confessed, "I must have done!" He enjoyed giving others a shock and, by the early 1970s, was no stranger to controversy. A leading light in the battle for equality, he staged a protest when a radio station in Britain's largest abortion provider, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (initially named the Birmingham Pregnancy Advisory Service) - later he abandoned his day job - as a lecturer in genetics - to open the Institute for Sex Education and Research.

There, for £95 a session, the male patient struggling with impotence might be eased - or massaged - through his difficulties by one of Cole's 10 attractive and friendly female "sex surrogates". Although such sessions, which later inspired the Virgin sex therapists in America, rarely ended with full penetration, it led to cries that Cole was running a brothel. The news that his 23-year-old third wife, Barbara Chilton, was pregnant did little to abate the scandal.

On one occasion he was nearly hounded by a reporter from the News of the World, who posed as a client but was driven away when a neighbour spotted a telephoto lens trained on Cole's windows from a car outside his clinic.

By the time of his marriage to Chilton, he was a 72-year-old student

form, he began to offer counselling to women considering terminations from his front room on the day that the Abortion Act, which legalised abortions by registered practitioners, came into force on April 27, 1967. Within two years, the service had helped some 14,000 women; Cole offered loans to those unable to pay the £55 fee, which at the time was at the lower end of the price scale.

Some of his views were regarded as unusual; for instance, his belief that "for some women an abortion is a traumatic rite of passage which forces them to grow up". And he was completely unshockable. Discussing sexual deviance, he said: "If someone gets turned on swinging from a chandelier in a Pac-a-Mac, then the only problem is the lack of chandeliers and Pac-a-Macs."

He also had an ingrained sense of mischief. His daughter Lisa described waiting for him by a fountain at a shopping centre in Birmingham. His sister Sarah had bought a bottle of raspberry ripple bubble bath from Body Shop. He decided to open and smell the bubble bath and pour it into the fountain; she said, "I was out of the centre as fast as my legs could carry me, mortified and laughing hysterically, while my friend was gobsmacked. I didn't see the result of the fountain until the next time I visited the fountain, it was dry and contained pot plants."

He drove - and frequently dented a series of Mercedes, which were joined by his favourite cigars, a brand fittingly called Romeo y Julieta. In his habits, Cole was eccentric, calling shopping "hunting". He enjoyed weekly trips to buy scent, especially Chanel, and gave his mother of twins, Stevie - his first wife, Ronnie Goldfinch; Nick and Matthew by his second wife, Sue Bellamy, and Lisa and Sarah by Barbara Chilton - were brought up from him. She was later president of Global Insurance Broker. Nick works in marketing and Sarah is a music promoter; Matthew is a chartered accountant and Lisa the mother of twins. All Cole's wives predeceased him. He moved to a nursing home in Edgbaston after a stroke in 2014 and died of an infection following a bout of pneumonia at Easter.

For the last 32 years of his life, he lived alone, rising at 5am each day to write, surrounded by plants and African fertility figures. He inspired the book Sex: Why It Goes Wrong and What You Can Do About It (1989), which contained the memorable line: "is Masturbation Good For You?" to which his answer was: "Yes, it's like asking, 'Is climbing a mountain good for you?" - it all depends on whether you enjoy climbing mountains."

Summing up the reputation of the permissive society, Cole relished the fact that anyone at all could enter WH Smith and buy The Lover's Guide video off the top shelf. "I think that's wonderful," he said.

Martin Cole, sexologist, was born