Perhaps we’re not as accepting as we think

Fans of the BBC drama series Call the Midwife may be spending their Sunday evenings wondering why some people living only half a century ago were so cruel and unforgiving of those who did not conform to societal norms.

This week’s episode told the harrowing story of a young teacher who felt driven to terminate her pregnancy rather than give birth to an illegitimate baby, while another storyline focused on suspicions that a foreigner was responsible for spreading typhoid across London’s East End.

Call the Midwife has also explored the issue of homosexuality, which was illegal at the time the series is set. Indeed, as recently as the 1970s mental health nurses were involved in treatments that aimed to ‘cure’ people by converting them to heterosexuality. You can read more about what this involved in this week’s Nursing Standard, which features a book on the practices employed at the time.

Curing Queers, written by nursing lecturer Tommy Dickinson, explains that some of the nurses responsible for delivering such treatments did so with a genuine belief they were helping their patients. Only a small number refused to take part, although Dr Dickinson stresses that many of those involved in this week’s Nursing Standard, which features a book on the practices employed at the time.

It would be easy to be dismissive of such practices as relics of a bygone age, but a recent study by the charity Stonewall found one in ten health and social care staff have witnessed colleagues expressing the belief that homosexuality can be cured. That figure rose to more than one in five in London, often perceived to be a more socially liberal city than others in the UK.

Discrimination against people because of their sexual orientation or marital status may be less prevalent than in the days of Call the Midwife, but it still exists. This week’s issue, which marks Lesbian and Gay History Month, explores some of the consequences of such prejudice, and hopefully will help change attitudes so that everyone receives the care they deserve.

See features pages 18-20, 22/23 and 25; reflections pages 26/27 and 29; and careers pages 64/65 and 66.