

Fact Sheet:

Service Provision to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community

This fact sheet aims to provide information to improve service provision to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people in health care settings.

Disclosure of Gender Identity and Sexuality

Health care providers have a duty of care to ensure that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people are able to access services within a safe, inclusive environment, which enables LGBT clients to be able to address sexuality and gender identity issues comfortably. However many LGBT people are sceptical of the standard of care and the level of knowledge service providers can offer in relation to sexuality and gender identity issues. Due to the noted scepticism and a variety of other personal and environmental factors accessing health care services can be difficult for LGBT people.

Factors that can make it difficult for LGBT clients to access health services:

- Heterosexism (assuming clients are heterosexual)
- The lack of service providers knowledge of LGBT issues
- The fear of breaches of confidentiality
- Expectations or experiences of discrimination/negative attitudes from service providers
- The client's levels of self-acceptance and comfort with issues of sexuality or gender identity
- Social isolation experienced as a result of sexuality or gender identity
- The levels of homophobia or transphobia in the wider community

These factors can also affect the willingness of LGBT clients to address or disclose sexuality, gender identity or HIV/AIDS issues with services providers.

Health Care Provider's use of Language: Assisting Disclosure

The appropriate use of language can assist LGBT people to feel comfortable disclosing and addressing sexuality and gender identity issues with service providers. Health care providers need to be conscious of not using heterosexist language during consultations with clients. Heterosexism is the tendency to view the world in exclusively heterosexual terms, in other words assuming a client is heterosexual. When heterosexist language is used LGBT clients may feel that service providers are not aware, knowledgeable, accepting or comfortable addressing sexuality or gender identity issues. This may cause the client to feel uncomfortable about disclosing these issues and may result in the non-disclosure of sexuality and gender identity issues to service providers.

To encourage LGBT clients to feel more comfortable about disclosing sexuality or gender identity issues service providers need to be conscious of using gender-neutral language during client consultations. This prevents service providers asking questions that already assume a person's sexuality or heterosexuality.

Examples of Client Questioning Gender-Neutral vs Heterosexist Language

Client: could be heterosexual, bisexual or a lesbian...	Gender-Neutral Language	Gendered/Heterosexist Language
Female	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are you in a relationship?• Do you have a partner?• Are you having sex with a man, woman or both?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you have a boyfriend?• Do you have a husband or boyfriend?• Are you having sex with men?

Who Is Having Sex With Who?

Sexual Identity and Sexual Activity

It is important to note that not everyone's sexual identity will correlate with their sexual behaviours. People may identify as being a lesbian or gay man and still be engaging in heterosexual sex, while others may not identify as a lesbian, gay man or even bisexual although engage in same sex sexual practices. It is important for health care providers to first focus upon the sexual behaviours of a client rather than the client's sexual identity.

Gender Identity and Sexuality

Gender identity issues are not synonymous to sexuality. Gender identity is an individual's sense of identity in relation to being a man or a woman. It is not centred upon issues of sexuality or sexual behaviours. Transgender people are often offended by health care provider's unnecessary enquiries about their sexual identity and sexual practices. A diverse range of sexualities exist in the transgender community, as they do within the broader community. Transgender people identify as heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian and gay. However the distinction between gender identity and sexuality is important for health care providers to understand. Enquiries regarding a transgender person's relationships or sexual activities, when appropriate, should be treated with sensitivity and based upon gender-neutral language to avoiding assuming a person's sexual identity.

(For more information refer to Fact Sheet Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Identities).

How comfortable is your client?

It is important to be aware of the client's personal level of comfort in addressing sexuality or gender identity issues. An individual's level of comfort may vary depending on whether they have disclosed this information to other people, if they have support to address these issues and their personal levels of acceptance and understanding of sexuality or gender identity.

Health care providers should be aware that some LGBT clients may not have disclosed information regarding their sexuality or gender identity to other people. This may indicate that the client is still struggling to come out. Coming out is the process of integrating ones sexuality or gender identity into their social and personal lives. Some LGBT people may have to confront issues of internal homophobia or internal transphobia, involving negative attitudes, beliefs and feelings towards their own sexuality or gender identity before they can accept their own LGBT identity.

The initial process of coming out can be quite traumatic and stressful. LGBT people may face rejection from family and friends, open hostility, social isolation, stigma, discrimination and even violence as a result of their sexuality or gender identity. However being able to come out and overcome issues related to internal homophobia/transphobia is an important element in being able to accept ones own identity and reduce the mental health concerns that LGBT often confront when addressing sexuality and gender identity issues. It is considered a crucial factor in the overall health and wellbeing of an LGBT person.

Supporting LGBT Clients

Social isolation is a predominant concern for the health and wellbeing of LGBT people, especially in rural areas. Many LGBT people do not disclose issues of sexuality or gender identity due to the fear of experiencing negative reactions or rejection from family, friends and the general community. Social isolation is reinforced when LGBT people do not know other LGBT people or have access to support services to address sexuality or gender identity issues. This may affect an individual's level of self-acceptance and reinforce internal homophobia or internal transphobia.

Health care providers need to be aware of the importance of social support for LGBT clients, especially for clients dealing with internal homophobia or transphobia, or still in the process of coming out. The inability to share these concerns or disclose gender identity and sexuality issues can lead to mental health problems, including depression, anxiety and distress associated with the fear of being outed and the inability to express one's own identity.

The Importance of Confidentiality

Health care providers are familiar with the duty of confidentiality to clients. However for some LGBT client's confidentiality may be a higher priority than other clients. This is often reflected in and reinforced by the high levels of discrimination encountered on the basis of sexuality, gender identity and HIV/AIDS status within the broader community. The fear of breaches in confidentiality or being outed, which results in having information relating to sexuality, gender identity or HIV/AIDS status disclosed to other people without the individual's consent, is one of the main reasons LGBT people are reluctant to access services or disclose LGBT or HIV/AIDS issues to service providers. This is especially relevant if a client has not disclosed these issues to family, friends or other members of the community.

The consequences of breaches in confidentiality surrounding issues of sexuality, gender identity or HIV/AIDS can result in:

- Rejection from family and friends
- Loss of partners
- Discrimination and stigma from the general community
- Loss of employment
- Harassment and threats or actual violence
- High levels of stress and anxiety resulting from the disclosure of this information and its consequences
- Having to geographically relocate due to high levels of discrimination, harassment, threats or actual violence within the community.

LGBT clients are more likely to discuss sexuality and gender identity issues if they are assured that confidentiality will be maintained within the service. It is important that LGBT clients are assured that confidentiality will be maintained, with service providers offering an understanding of the highly sensitive nature of these issues. However this assurance needs to be certified within all staff that access client files eg receptionist, file clerks and other health care professionals within the service. This is a particular concern for LGBT client's in small communities where staff may know their family or friends, or their family or friends work within the service.

Improving Access to Health Care Services

Health services need to ensure that service environments and service provision promotes a discrimination-free and confidential setting for LGBT clients to feel comfortable in addressing these issues with service providers. LGBT clients need to be assured they are accessing services that are receptive, comfortable and respectful of LGBT concerns.

Health care providers can assist LGBT people coming to terms with their sexuality or gender identity by being comfortable discussing these issues, being informed about sexuality and gender identity issues and the coming out process that is involved for most LGBT people. Being able to provide information for LGBT people to access appropriate forms of social support or information on sexuality or gender identity issues is an important part of assisting people coming to terms with these issues.