

Towards a more respectful LGBTQIA+ health care

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Accessing health care has been a great challenge to many LGBTQIA+ persons (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual persons, and those who identify with any other sexual orientation and gender identities and expressions not specified). Like many social services, health care services require clients to identify themselves to access the services. Many health facilities in the country do not readily offer a cordial environment for persons who identify with non-heterosexual orientations or with genders that are different from their respective sexes

assigned at birth. Health care workers may, with or without intention, ask certain questions or make discriminating remarks that hurt LGBTQIA+ persons or make them feel judged, uncomfortable, unwelcome, and unsafe.¹ Even when LGBTQIA+ persons get past the identification and reception processes in the system, medical services specific to their needs are seldom offered by facilities in the country.² All these may make LGBTQIA+ persons lose their trust in the medical system and discourage them from accessing the health care services that they need.^{1,3}

Before coming to health facilities, many LGBTQIA+ persons have already been judged by society and their families based on who they are.² Many LGBTQIA+ persons fear misgendering—or non-acknowledgment of one's affirmed gender—and deadnaming—or calling someone by an incorrect name, often a name that one no longer uses. Many are reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation or sexual behavior to health workers for fear of experiencing homophobia or of being discriminated against.³

It matters how one is received, treated, accommodated, attended to, or asked about one's identity in public places, such as a health care facility. Because many LGBTQIA+ persons have been through several traumatic experiences that involve questioning their identities, how they are addressed or referred to—with the use of names and pronouns—is especially important to them. Any use of language by health care providers that pathologize or invisibilize certain sexual orientations, sexual characteristics, gender identities and expression, and sexual characteristics (SOGIESC) can hurt LGBTQIA+ persons. In a health care facility, it matters how health needs related to one's identity—such as gender identity—are considered in the range of services or

health care programs being offered. It also matters how one's affirmed gender identity is represented in media (think: educational materials, posters, signages) and asked about in forms or medical records.

Many health facility personnel lack awareness of the diversity of SOGIESC and of what many LGBTQIA+ persons experience with their own families and the society. Health facilities can take steps towards making health care workers more knowledgeable, open-minded, and competent in handling the health care staff-client interface. A genuinely welcoming environment in health care facilities will help eliminate clients' fears of being judged or discriminated against, and will encourage everyone to seek the health care that they need.

As a range of services, health care in our country still lacks several elements that would make our system responsive or sensitive to the needs of LGBTQIA+ persons. Many of these lacking elements can also be attributed to the lack of a national law that mandates the presence of such elements. Health facilities can set up gender-affirming services that offer endocrinology and surgical services to make it easier for trans persons to access the health care that they need. Mental health services, and reproductive sexual health services that address specific concerns of men who have sex with men, women who have sex with women, or those who transition from one gender to another should also be made available to all persons who seek these services. LGBTQIA+ persons should, without fear of discrimination, have access to and be able to afford the full range of comprehensive health care services through the different health financing schemes available to the general public.

Affirming the diversity of sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and gender characteristics is an expression of respect for the dignity of all persons. Respect should be the impetus for a systematic move towards health care services that are more accessible to LGBTQIA+ persons.

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