



FEATURE

BRIEFING

Caring for LGBT patients in the NHS

Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender patients have poor experiences and outcomes, a parliamentary inquiry hears. **Francesca Robinson** reports

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What evidence is there of poor care?

The UK Equality Act 2010 says that LGBT people must be treated fairly and without discrimination. But last year a government survey to which 108 100 LGBT adults responded found disproportionate dissatisfaction with NHS services.¹ Respondents said that staff members were ignorant of their health needs, specifically about mental and sexual health services.

Poor mental health is more prevalent among LGBT people than the general population. Of the 33 440 respondents who reported accessing or trying to access mental health services in the past year, 28% said it had not been easy. The commonest reason given was long waits (72%), and about a fifth cited unsupportive GPs.

Respondents who mentioned gender identity and gender transition described difficulty in accessing services. GPs lacked knowledge about services and how to access them, they reported.

In a 2018 survey for the LGBT equality charity Stonewall almost a quarter of 5000 respondents had heard healthcare staff making negative remarks about LGBT people.² One in seven avoided seeking healthcare for fear of discrimination from staff.

Parliament's Women and Equalities Committee has an ongoing inquiry into inequalities faced by LGBT people when accessing health and social care services, due to report in autumn.

What do patients say?

Cecily Ward, an LGBT youth group user, told the parliamentary committee, "It is very hard, at least in my London borough and the neighbouring one, to access mental health services . . . That is causing big problems."

Linda, a 65 year old patient in Scotland, said of staff in Stonewall's report, "It never occurs to many of them to ask . . . about gender and sexuality so that they can factor this in when dealing with healthcare needs."²

Stonewall also quoted 21 year old Lisa from Wales: "Doctors and nurses are really uninformed. Going for an appointment

about my mental health usually ends with me in tears because they've decided all of my anxiety and depression is caused by me being trans."

What is being done to improve services?

The *NHS Long Term Plan* commits to tackling health inequalities for LGBT people within a decade.³

Last year the government's general LGBT action plan pledged "a country that works for everyone." In March 2019 it appointed a national adviser for LGBT health in the NHS: Michael Brady, medical director of the charity the Terrence Higgins Trust and a sexual health and HIV consultant at King's College Hospital.⁴

The action plan promises to end conversion therapy to try to change sexual orientation, which 7% of LGBT people reported having been offered outside the NHS.¹ It also pledges to raise healthcare professionals' awareness of LGBT issues and to improve adult gender identity services and mental health and fertility services for LGBT people.

It wants patients' sexual orientation recorded throughout the NHS. Monitoring is "the only way you can ensure you can do audits to demonstrate health equity," Richard Ma, a GP and researcher at Imperial College London with interests in access to sexual health services, told *The BMJ*.

What might best practice look like?

The charity the LGBT Foundation offers a quality assurance and social prescribing programme to help general practices improve how they meet LGBT patients' needs. The Pride in Practice initiative, with government funding and endorsement from the Royal College of General Practitioners, reaches more than 1 600 000 patients through 398 primary care services and has helped train 4496 health professionals.

More than 200 hospitals have a "rainbow badge" scheme to signify that wearers can support LGBT patients.⁵ "These are small but visible signs that a practice or trust is LGBTQ friendly," says Ma.

What can healthcare professionals do better?

Brady told the Women and Equalities Committee's inquiry, "I want all healthcare workers to understand the needs of LGBT individuals and for everyone to feel comfortable and confident that they will be treated fairly when they access healthcare."⁶

John Stewart, director of specialised commissioning at NHS England, said, "There are groups of patients who do not feel like the NHS is providing an inclusive service. This is about changing the culture, among both professionals and commissioners, right up to the top level."

Ma told *The BMJ*, "We need to get our own house in order by tackling homophobic attitudes within our profession and institutions.

"There is already equality and diversity training within the medical curriculum, in the MRCPG [exam for membership of the Royal College of General Practitioners], and in other mandatory training for NHS trusts, but these vary in quality.

"What really matters is visibility. LGBTQ healthcare professionals, including those who identify as queer or are

questioning their sexual identity, can make a difference by being out and visible. This can help others who feel less confident."

Competing interests: I have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

- 1 Government Equalities Office. National LGBT survey. Jul 2018. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/722314/GEO-LGBT-Survey-Report.pdf?_ga=2.51981227.300164495.1566555469-619039795.1563360371.
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- 4 Government Equalities Office. LGBT action plan. July 2018. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/721367/GEO-LGBT-Action-Plan.pdf.
- 5 Rimmer A. 60 seconds on . . . rainbow badges. *BMJ* 2018;363:k4988. doi:10.1136/bmj.k4988 30470682
- 6 House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee. Oral evidence: health and social care and LGBT communities, HC 1492. Jul 2019. <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/women-and-equalities-committee/health-and-social-care-and-lgbt-communities/oral/103530.pdf>.

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