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For LGBTQ people, finding a family doctor can be tough

While acceptance and understanding of LGBTQ identities continues to grow, gaps in care persist.

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LGBTQ people should search out a doctor who makes them feel comfortable.

By: Dr. Amy Bourns University of Toronto, Published on Tue Jun 23 2015

A close friend recently told me the story of her cousin: 20 years old and living in a small Northern Ontario town, he (born male) had been depressed for some time and no one could quite figure out why. Until the day that (she) courageously came forward and confided in her mom that she had been hiding that she was transgender. She also acknowledged that instead of seeking treatment from a medical provider, she had recently begun to take hormones that she ordered online, a potentially unsafe practice.

Her mother insisted she see the local family doctor, who refused to treat her or order any investigations until she saw a psychiatrist in Toronto. They spent a lot of their savings paying for trips to see the psychiatrist — but more than a year later she has yet to receive a prescription for hormone therapy, a treatment that research has shown saves lives otherwise lost to suicide.

In my practice as a family doctor with a focus on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) health, stories like this are all too common. While acceptance and understanding of LGBTQ identities continues to grow, gaps in care persist.

People often ask me whether LGBTQ-identified individuals need to find a family doctor with experience in their particular health issues. This is an important question: studies show that LGBTQ people are more likely to delay medical care due to fear of or past experiences with discrimination.

My answer is that it depends on the individual. The health needs of LGBTQ people are largely similar to the majority of the population, which means that most family doctors can meet them. Some LGBTQ people are comfortable coming out and working with their family physician to address their specific needs as long as they feel their provider is supportive and positive.

Others, however, prefer a doctor who identifies as LGBTQ themselves, or has experience with or training in working with the community. Many may also prefer to be part of an LGBTQ-friendly space — like a community-based health centre that provides support and focuses on health issues specific to this population.

For transgender patients, the search for a family physician can be particularly challenging. Their needs, both emotional and physical, may be better met when treated by a physician who has developed comfort in working with this community. Yet these physicians are difficult to find: training for doctors in transgender health, while growing, is still lacking. For instance, research has shown that many providers, such as

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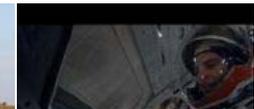


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that Northern Ontario family doctor, are uncomfortable or unwilling to prescribe hormone therapy for transitioning people. This lack of access often results in patients being placed on long waitlists to see a physician with familiarity in transgender care.

Thankfully the situation is improving: medical schools are including more LGBTQ—specific training in their curriculum, and LGBTQ cultural competency training is available to health professionals. Guidelines have been developed to help support family doctors in providing comprehensive care for transgender patients, including hormone therapy.

To find an LGBTQ-positive doctor, visit [Rainbow Health Ontario's](#) website — the organization lists health providers and programs that have expressed a commitment to providing welcoming and knowledgeable care to LGBTQ people across Ontario.

I also encourage family physicians to take steps to better demonstrate your openness to accepting LGBTQ patients, such as posting a rainbow flag or other LGBTQ-friendly symbols in your office, ensuring patient intake forms are written in inclusive and open language, and ensuring your practice is listed in directories on local LGBTQ organization websites.

Most importantly, I encourage all patients, whether LGBTQ or not, to be open and transparent with your family doctor if only to ensure that doctor is the right fit for you and your health needs.

Dr. Amy Bourns is the faculty lead for LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender & Queer) Health Education in Undergraduate Medical Education and a lecturer for the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Toronto. She is also a family physician at Sherbourne Health Centre with a special focus in LGBTQ health. Doctors' Notes is a weekly column by members of the University of Toronto's Faculty of Medicine. Email doctorsnotes@thestar.ca.

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