

# EDGE MEDIA NETWORK

## Health/Fitness

### The Importance of Competent Healthcare for LGBTQ Older Adults

Friday Mar 30, 2018



Navigating healthcare proves even more challenging for LGBTQ older adults.

*By William LaRock, PhD, RN, APNP, ANP-BC, VNSNY CHOICE SelectHealth*

There are many healthcare disparities that the LGBTQ community faces -- from increased cancer risk factors to higher rates of social isolation and depression-but navigating this very personal aspect of life proves even more challenging for LGBTQ older adults. After a lifetime facing stigma and keeping their sexual orientation or gender identity concealed, many do not receive care that is sensitive to their needs and concerns, resulting in even further isolation and health problems down the line.

In addition to disproportionately engaging in risky health behaviors like smoking and non-prescribed drug use, many LGBTQ elders grew up during a period of less acceptance and a long history of bias in the medical community, and thus delay or resist healthcare altogether out of fear of discrimination.

Working at [VNSNY CHOICE SelectHealth](#), a special needs health plan for those living with HIV/AIDS, homeless individuals and transgender individuals that is part of the larger Visiting Nurse Service of New York, I know firsthand how important it is to first: understand the ongoing cycle of issues that result in health disparities for the LGBTQ community, and then: work to link them to care that is sensitive to and informed by their unique healthcare needs.

#### **A Vicious Cycle of Incompetent Care**

Most of the mental and physical health disparities faced by LGBTQ older adults are caused by the overarching issue of lack of training and education around LGBTQ healthcare needs.

Most medical, nursing, nurse practitioner and public health schools still include no coursework or instruction on the healthcare needs of the LGBTQ population. The intersection of lack of training and actual practice creates a circle of continued stigma.

This feeds the loop of inadequate screening and treatment, perceived lack of sensitivity of healthcare providers by their patients, and continued avoidance by patients of self-disclosure and/or engagement with healthcare providers.

To break it down: because of a lack of training, LGBTQ healthcare issues are unaddressed by the provider. Because these issues were not addressed outright, the patient is then less likely to self-disclose. Then, the stigma is reinforced, and the screening and health disparities continue. The cycle repeats itself again and again.

The most significant step institutions can make to help bridge these gaps in to conduct proper training for working with LGBTQ communities. [Partners in Care](#), VNSNY's private care affiliate, just received [SAGE Platinum Certification](#), completing platinum credentialing for all of VNSNY Provider Services. SAGE is the country's largest and oldest organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBTQ older adults, and a SAGE certification ensures that all staff are aware of and sensitive to the needs and concerns of LGBTQ older adults. This is one example of how VNSNY stays at the forefront of healthcare innovation and coordinated care management in the home -- and how other organizations can strive to do the same.



*Look for SAGE-certified care providers.*

## **Taking Ownership of Your Health**

If you are an LGBTQ older adult looking for care, here are a few steps you can take to receive the proper personalized treatment you deserve:

Talk to friends, family, co-workers, etc., especially if they are LGBTQ: Ask who their doctors are and where they receive medical services. Most cities have a local LGBTQ community center that can provide more information on LGBTQ-friendly options (including medical and legal resources) within the community itself. Find your local center and contact info here. You can also find LGBTQ-friendly physicians on the website of the Gay & Lesbian Medical Association.

Look for SAGE-certified care providers: As explained earlier, a SAGE certification requires that an institution's clinicians, administrative and senior staff receive training on working with LGBT communities. This can include but is not limited to:

A dedication to providing a welcoming and bias-free environment to all LGBTQ patients.

Allowing patients to feel free and safe and to be open about their sexual orientation and gender identity with their caregivers and to expect nothing less than utmost respect and encouragement in return.

Giving special attention to protocols and procedures around gender identity so that insurance coverage is not affected.

Call and ask questions: If your only provider options are not SAGE-certified and you don't have any known LGBTQ-friendly providers in your area, don't be afraid to call the options in your area and ask some questions. Do they currently serve LGBTQ older adults? Has their staff received any training about the unique needs of LGBTQ older adults? Note if they seem at ease with your questions--or don't.

By arming ourselves with knowledge about the current state of healthcare issues surrounding the LGBTQ community, and working to break the cycle one element at a time on both the clinician and patient side, we can hopefully one day provide an equal level of healthcare service to our LGBTQ brothers and sisters so these disparities no longer continue and everyone has the opportunity to lead safe and healthy lives.

*Dr. William LaRock is a Clinical Director at [VNSNY CHOICE](#) SelectHealth, a program dedicated to reducing HIV statewide by helping people return to care. Previously, Dr. LaRock spent several years in South Africa designing public health programs for the HIV epidemic. VNSNY is the largest not-for-profit home- and community-based health care management organization in the United States, and is also the largest in the New York metropolitan area credentialed with SAGECare Platinum-level LGBT cultural competency.*