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# The Health Care Experiences of LGBT Seniors

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With 4.9 million Canadians aged 65 and older and close to 6,000 centenarians, Canada – like many countries – is facing an aging population.<sup>1</sup> Many older Canadians are managing chronic or episodic illnesses, disabilities or conditions that make for frequent encounters with the health care system. When seeking medical attention, LGBT seniors face discrimination that can act as barriers to care. The main hurdles for LGBT seniors include identifying oneself as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, and experiencing discrimination.<sup>2</sup>

According to Statistics Canada, the use of the health care system (e.g. having a regular doctor, consultations with health care professionals and receiving preventive screening tests) by gay, lesbian and bisexual Canadians varies by sexual identity, and their health care choices differ from those of heterosexual seniors.<sup>3</sup> Many seniors only discuss their sexual orientation in relation to their care, and many service providers avoid discussing issues relating to sexual orientation when making care plans. Research performed at McGill University revealed a “don’t ask, don’t tell” passive approach toward revealing sexual orientation in the health care system.<sup>4</sup>

Many gay and lesbian seniors have support from their biological families and children and grandchildren; others rely on friends considered as family, also known

as “fictive kin.”<sup>5</sup> Health care providers do not always understand this broad definition of family and therefore it is common for same-sex partners to identify themselves as friends or roommates in order to avoid being treated differently. This can often make it difficult for LGBT partners to show affection or be acknowledged as the patient’s spouse. A number of studies on gay and lesbian seniors and their caregivers have found that they may experience both *actual* and *anticipated* discrimination via homophobic or heterosexist attitudes or policies in the health care system. Actual discrimination has been reported in hospital practices surrounding visiting hours, such as LGBT caregivers being denied acknowledgement as family members when seeking to visit their partners. Anticipated discrimination could affect seniors’ willingness to reveal their sexual orientation or even access services due to prior negative experiences. Both forms of discrimination pose a challenge to both the possibilities of self-identifying as a gay or lesbian senior and receiving appropriate care.<sup>6</sup>

In order to address the biases within the health care system, current research has suggested that specialized services designed to engage dialogue between gay and lesbian community health professionals and enhance integration would have a significant impact on the health care experiences

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada, *National Seniors Day... By the Numbers* (2013), accessed March 18, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1hx0btA>.

<sup>2</sup> Shari Brotman, Bill Ryan and Robert Cormier, “The Health and Social Service Needs of Gay and Lesbian Elders and Their Families in Canada,” *The Gerontologist* 43:2 (2003), accessed January 20, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1ggcMmo>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Tjepkema, “Health Care Use Among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Canadians,” *Health Reports* 19:1, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 82-003-x (March 2008), accessed January 21, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1iZMGYN>.

<sup>4</sup> Brotman, Ryan and Cormier.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Shari Brotman, Bill Ryan, Shannon Collins, Line Chamberland, Robert Cormier, Danielle Julien, Elizabeth Meyer, Allan Peterkin and Brenda Richard, “Coming Out to Care: Caregivers of Gay and Lesbian Seniors in Canada,” *The Gerontologist* 47:4 (2007), accessed January 22, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1dPbnOB>.

## Evolving Definitions and Terminology

<p><b>Most research uses L + G</b></p>	<p><b>Most commonly used term in media: LGBT</b></p>	<p><b>L Lesbian:</b> a female homosexual.<sup>8</sup></p>
		<p><b>G Gay:</b> a term that was once associated with either homosexual males or females, but that is becoming more and more specifically associated with male homosexuals.<sup>9</sup></p>
<p><b>Inclusive term in documents: LGBTTQ</b></p>	<p><b>Most commonly used term in media: LGBT</b></p>	<p><b>B Bisexual:</b> a person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to males/men and females/women. This attraction does not have to be equally split between genders and there may be a preference for one gender over others.<sup>10</sup></p>
		<p><b>T Transgender:</b> a person who lives as a member of a gender other than that expected based on anatomical sex. Sexual orientation varies and is not dependent on gender identity.<sup>11</sup></p>
		<p><b>T Two-spirit:</b> an Aboriginal term used to describe people who embody both the male and female spirit. Two-spirit people were highly valued in traditional Aboriginal culture because they brought harmony and balance and could sit in both the male and female camps.<sup>12</sup></p>
<p><b>Emerging inclusive term: QUILTBAG</b></p>	<p><b>Inclusive term in documents: LGBTTQ</b></p>	<p><b>Q Queer:</b> Traditionally a pejorative term, queer has been appropriated by some LGBT people to describe themselves. However, it is not universally accepted even within the LGBT community and should be avoided unless quoting or describing someone who self-identifies that way.<sup>13</sup></p>
		<p><b>QUILTBAG:</b> an acronym that stands for:  <b>Q</b> Queer/Questioning  <b>U</b> Undecided  <b>I</b> Intersex  <b>L</b> Lesbian  <b>T</b> Transgender/Transsexual  <b>B</b> Bisexual  <b>A</b> Asexual  <b>G</b> Gay/Genderqueer</p> <p>It is meant to be a more inclusive term than GLBT/LGBT and to be more pronounceable (and memorable) than some of the other variations or extensions on the GLBT/LGBT abbreviation.<sup>14</sup></p>

of LGBT seniors in Canada.<sup>7</sup> Such services would include training sessions for health care workers on the needs of gay and lesbian seniors; hiring gay and lesbian health care workers; using gender-neutral language in discussions about identity and relationships; ensuring confidentiality; specialized facilities (e.g. Kipling Acres, a long-term care facility and gay-positive environment that provides services to seniors in Toronto), support

groups or telephone support lines; and community outreach programs. These services aim to reduce the barriers between LGBT seniors and their health care providers and improve health care interactions for both the care provider and the patient. ◀

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Klinik Community Health Centre, "LGBTQT\*," *Teen Talk*, accessed March 25, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1m49aFw>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> UCLA LGBT Resource Center, *LGBTQI Terminology*, accessed June 16, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1iSvIHc>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Klinik Community Health Centre.

<sup>13</sup> GLAAD, *GLAAD Media Reference Guide*, 8th Edition, accessed June 18, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1kO30X7>.

<sup>14</sup> Tumblr.com, "QUILTBAG," *Queer Dictionary*, accessed March 25, 2014, <http://bit.ly/ODGM22>.