



tion that defines the quality of health care. The fear of being rendered invisible is a huge barrier to lesbians approaching a new health care provider. We, as physicians, need to ask ourselves what prevents us from asking the

“right” questions — those that would allow patients to be comfortable being themselves. Is it simply naïveté, for which some education is needed and nothing more? Might it be bigotry or simply indifference? We need to recognize our prejudices and discomforts and either learn to overcome them or inform patients that their health care needs might be better met by another physician. Understanding and accepting differences do not necessarily imply approval. We do have the means available to educate ourselves so that we can be in an improved position to provide more appropriate and better health care to all our patients. Table 2 lists guidelines for providing good health care to lesbian patients.

**Table 2: Guidelines for providing good health care to lesbians**

- Don't make assumptions
- Remember that identity does not equal behaviour
- Examine your own biases — how do they affect your patient interactions?
- Remember that *how* you ask questions may be just as important as the questions themselves
- If you can't support your patients' identity, refer them to someone who can
- Don't contradict your patients when they make statements about themselves; avoid arguments
- Roll with resistance, giving your patient time to integrate information and develop trust in you and the process
- Educate yourself about issues relevant to good health care for lesbians
- Involve your patients' significant others in decision-making and planning
- Be aware of and display resources in your waiting room to let patients know you are approachable
- Use inclusive language on all office forms and when talking with your patients
- Ask your patients if there is something that you've missed asking about that they feel is important for you to know
- Don't make assumptions

We lesbians want the same respectful and competent health care that everyone else wants. We, as physicians, have a responsibility to provide equitable health care to all. It is acceptable to ask questions and to be less than perfect in interactions with patients if our intent is to empathize and provide the best care that we are able. We can learn together in partnership with our patients and colleagues. We physicians need to increase our own awareness and broaden our conceptual beliefs in order to fulfill that role that has been entrusted to us as health care providers.

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## Resources for lesbians and their doctors

Gay and Lesbian Medical Association  
459 Fulton St., Suite 107  
San Francisco CA 94102  
tel 415 255-4547  
www.glma.org/

An international organization of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) physicians, medical students and their supporters. A huge source of information and support.

*Journal of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association*

Subscription information:  
Plenum Publishing Corp.  
233 Spring St.  
New York NY 10013  
tel 212 620-8468  
fax 212 807-1047

A multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed quarterly, devoted to the study of the health of the LGBT populations.

Lesbian Health Bibliography, compiled by Liza Rankow, PA-C, MHS  
Ordering information:  
Office of Gay and Lesbian Health Concerns  
Bureau of HIV Program Services

New York City Department of Health  
601-125 Worth St., Box 67  
New York NY 10013  
tel 212 788-4310  
fax 212 788-5243

Originally published by the National Center for Lesbian Rights in January 1995. A 50-page booklet listing 798 references relevant to lesbian health issues.

*Free your mind. The book for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths — and their allies*, by Ellen Bass and Kate Kaufman. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc.; 1996. An excellent resource for young people and anyone who deals with them.

National Lesbian and Gay Health Association  
1407 S St. NW  
Washington DC 20009  
tel 202 939-7880

This association has a publication list for relevant issues and is a good resource. Unfortunately, I know of no Canadian counterpart.

*The Lesbian Health Book*, edited by Jocelyn

White, MD and Marissa C. Martinez. Seal Press, 1997.

Covers many aspects of lesbian health but is mainly anecdotal. One of its strongest features is the large number of resources listed in each section, for example, old lesbians, parenting, research and myriad others. Excellent for lesbian patients.

The Mary-Helen Mautner Project for Lesbians with Cancer  
1707 L St. NW, Suite 1060  
Washington DC 20036  
tel 202 332-5536;  
www.sirius.com/~edisol/mautner/index.html

Lesbian Mothers Support Society  
630 4th Ave NE  
Calgary AB T2E 0K1  
tel 403 265-6433  
www.lesbian.org/lesbian-moms/index.html

Lesbian Org, an online resource of information and links  
www.lesbian.org/  
This site leads to many other sites relevant to lesbian health. An excellent resource.