ENSURING EQUITY | EXPANDING ACCESS | TRANSFORMING CARE

LGBTQ+ Health Program

PRECISION CARE FOR SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITY PEOPLE
We are at a critical juncture in health care in the United States. The confluence of COVID-19 and the movement for racial justice has made newly visible the profound link between disparities in health equity and the unequal distribution of civil rights. Today, more than ever before, there is a growing recognition that access to health and health care is unequally distributed, and that historically marginalized populations are suffering as a result.

In response to this growing awareness, the medical community is quickly pivoting to address the needs of under-resourced communities across our society that have long suffered from harmful social and economic conditions, unequal access to care, and a lack of representation in medical research. Included among these vulnerable populations are individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, many of whom remain largely underserved in health care and neglectfully underrepresented in medical research.

A fundamental transformation in the field of medicine is needed to fully address and ensure the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ patients. To meet this need, Stanford is developing an innovative program that integrates four key disciplines—clinical care, research, education, and advocacy—into one holistic, comprehensive care model. The new LGBTQ+ Health Program aims to address the medical, social, and mental health needs of LGBTQ+ people in the Bay Area and beyond.

**LACK OF PRECISION CARE**

Even in the Bay Area, a birthplace of the gay rights movement and home to the largest population of LGBTQ+ individuals in the country, the LGBTQ+ communities remain largely underserved in health care. This is, in part, due to a widespread lack of physicians who are adequately trained to address the physical, social, and mental health needs specific to these communities.

A pivotal study out of Stanford, led by Juno Obedin-Maliver, MD, MPH, MAS, and Mitchell R. Lunn, MD, MAS, found that the average medical school curriculum devotes five hours or less to LGBTQ+ health; and half of U.S. medical schools offer zero training. This pervasive lack of training can lead to insensitive or harmful encounters in the clinic, misunderstanding of health issues, and experiences of stigmatization and discrimination for patients who don’t fit sexual and gender norms. For transgender patients in particular, the lack of access to competent care has led a third of trans people to report a recent negative medical experience and at least a quarter to report avoiding health care out of fear of harassment and harm.

For many LGBTQ+ individuals, the lived experience of past mistreatment and the anticipation of future harm can result in fear and avoidance of medical care, which can have devastating effects on health outcomes. Due to the lack of culturally competent resources in health care, LGBTQ+ individuals are at increased risk for early death, cancer, cardiovascular disease, depression and other mental health illnesses, as well as suicide, homelessness, and substance abuse.

“We have a situation that is actually very dire,” says Dr. Juno Obedin-Maliver, assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology, who specializes in the gynecological and reproductive health-care needs of sexual and gender minority people. “We have people in our communities who need to talk about their blood pressure or their diabetes, how to be healthy, how to build a family, and they are scared to engage with the medical community because of how poorly they’ve been treated in the past.”

**Leslee Subak, MD**

*Katharine Dexter McCormick and Stanley McCormick Memorial Professor*

The health care that is provided to LGBTQ+ individuals is not precision-based. It is not based on their unique needs. We have the opportunity to be leaders in defining how we provide compassionate and exemplary care that addresses the unique situation of every individual and ensures patient satisfaction with outcomes of care, safety, and efficacy.
The need for health-care specialization is especially critical for transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals who require not only routine primary and specialty care services, but may also need specialized hormone therapy, gender-affirming surgeries, fertility preservation, and social and mental health services. Yet these patients are the least likely to have access to the services that meet their needs.

“Here at Stanford Medicine, we believe there is no one-size-fits-all type of health care, and this is especially true of LGBTQ+ people and families. For this reason, precision health care for LGBTQ+ communities is the foundation of our program and the guiding principle of our vision,” says Leslee Subak, MD, chair of obstetrics and gynecology at Stanford Medicine. “This is an area where Stanford can have tremendous impact. We have the opportunity to be leaders in defining how we provide compassionate and exemplary care that addresses the unique situation of every individual and ensures patient satisfaction with outcomes of care, safety, and efficacy.”

**COMPASSIONATE CLINICAL CARE**

To address the urgent need for precision medical care for this diverse population, Stanford has developed a dedicated LGBTQ+ Health Program, housed within the Stanford Primary Care Clinic in Los Altos. The growing multidisciplinary clinic is staffed by three primary care providers, and specialists from obstetrics and gynecology, dermatology, behavioral health, and more. Specialized services include hormone therapy and gender-affirming care and surgery. Providers also partner with experts throughout Stanford Medicine, including endocrinologists, urologists, and geriatricians. The clinic also offers support services for patients, including access to social workers, financial counseling, legal advocates, and patient and family counselors.

“We’ve created a patient-centered medical home that really focuses on bringing compassion and competency to the LGBTQ+ population,” says Benjamin Laniakea, MD, a family medicine physician specializing in full-spectrum LGBTQ+ health. “We want this to be a place where patients not only feel accepted, but welcomed.”

To meet the growing demand for services, Stanford Medicine is working to develop a larger, multidisciplinary LGBTQ+ health clinic in its outpatient center in Redwood City. Modeled on the well-established Pediatric and Adolescent Gender Clinic at Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital Stanford, the adult program will provide a seamless, well-coordinated continuum of care meant to span a patient’s lifetime.

**REPRESENTATION IN RESEARCH**

In addition to facing barriers in access to competent health care, LGBTQ+ people remain largely underrepresented in medical research, resulting in a lack of information about how LGBTQ+ identities affect health and well-being. Medical research often fails to account for LGBTQ+ identity at all, much less the impacts of those identities on health outcomes. This stark lack of data is in itself a barrier to progress for these communities, as well as for the researchers and clinicians working to better understand and address LGBTQ+ health, health practices, and health-care needs.
“There’s such a dearth of data that we can’t even begin to create interventions to make people’s lives healthier,” says Dr. Mitchell R. Lunn, assistant professor of nephrology and medicine, who co-leads research on sexual and gender minority people. “We actually don’t know where LGBTQ+ people live, we don’t know their races and ethnicities, their socioeconomic status, their ages.”

The PRIDE Study (pridestudy.org) seeks to reduce this information drought through community-engaged research. Developed by Drs. Lunn and Obedin-Maliver, this first-of-its-kind national, online study collects information annually about the physical, mental, and social health of LGBTQ+ people to better understand the many ways in which sexual orientation and gender identity affect health. Since launching in May 2017, more than 19,400 individuals have enrolled in The PRIDE Study. By examining this rich reservoir of data, Stanford researchers and collaborators around the country can gain insights into the health of sexual and gender minorities and inform new programs and services to meet the needs of this under-resourced population.

**EDUCATING FROM WITHIN**

Ensuring a culturally competent clinical experience for patients is also critical to improving the health of LGBTQ+ people. In the medical community, nothing short of a culture change is needed to ensure that patients of every gender and sexual orientation are consistently and universally treated with care and respect.

At Stanford University School of Medicine, we are dedicated to the development of preeminent providers and programs that can address the unique needs of these communities. Toward this end, we have dramatically expanded our medical school training to include LGBTQ+-specific health education throughout the academic curriculum. With the help of internal and external leaders, experts, and advocates, Stanford Medicine is also increasing training and education for staff throughout the organization—including nurses, medical assistants, front-office staff, and billing representatives—to help ensure that patients feel comfortable, understood, and accepted when they come to Stanford for medical care.

“There are a lot of people who are experiencing poor treatment, who are not getting answers to questions about their health and their health-care experiences. We have an incredible opportunity at Stanford to make that right,” says Dr. Obedin-Maliver. “And in the process, learn how to make health care better for everyone.”

**TOGETHER WE CAN CHANGE HEALTH CARE**

As an institution that values interdisciplinary collaboration, diversity, equity, and inclusion, Stanford Medicine stands with our LGBTQ+ communities—and is committed to ensuring that all people have equitable access to quality care.

Although we still have far to go, Stanford Medicine is prepared and committed to working to make a profound difference in the lives of our LGBTQ+ patients and community members. Please join us in this pioneering effort to create a welcoming, equitable, innovative, and leading-edge system of care.

**CONTACT US**

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