



TEN THINGS DENTAL STUDENTS CAN DO TO SUPPORT LGBT+ PATIENTS

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The experiences we have during our studies should be ones of equality, inclusion, respect and embracing diversity. We all want to live and work in a world where people are accepted for who they are and it's important that our patients feel comfortable in sharing anything with us that is appropriate to their ongoing health care.

LGBT Foundation have found in their work supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans patients that providing training to dental providers is essential to ensure 'excellence in LGBT healthcare.'

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The charity is one of the leading support organisations in the UK for LGBT people and one of the regular requests their Pride in Practice team receives from members of the LGBT community is 'where can I find a dentist that is LGBT inclusive?'

This is something that The University Dental Hospital of Manchester and the University of Manchester have been keen to support to ensure that the next generation of dental practitioners are fully aware of the needs of their LGBT Patients.

Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust have also been developing a pilot Pride in Practice Programme at the Trust with LGBT Foundation to meet the needs of acute services

Feedback from users of community dental services that the Dental Hospital have provided include LGBT asylum seekers,

HIV+ people, trans and non-binary people and others who identify as LGBT+ and all have reported increasing difficulty in accessing an NHS dentist they felt comfortable with.

So how can dental students make sure that they are catering for the needs of their future

patients who may identify as LGBT+?

We've put together ten tips learned from our experience working with LGBT+ people, dental providers, dental students and tutors to assist you in approaching this issue with improved confidence and knowledge.

1. Reach out to the LGBT Community

Find out what local LGBT services are in your area and share their information resources. Visibility is a key component to creating a safe space and helping patients to feel recognised. One example would be to display posters showing diverse communities or local LGBT organisations. Familiarising yourself with LGBT services can also help you to understand the challenges faced by your LGBT patients. Signposting to a mix of mainstream and LGBT specific services will help your patients to have confidence in you and your practice too.

2. Utilise monitoring opportunities

The clinical systems we may have to use are not always inclusive, as many I.T systems have not been updated for a long time. One shortcoming when you have to input a new patient is that male or female may be the only options for gender. Alongside this, many paper forms used to register new patients also have a binary M/F choice. It's important to understand that before you see your patient in clinic, the patient might have already experienced a barrier in simply registering for treatment.

One of the biggest barriers to treatment can be patient anxiety about seeing the dentist and sometimes getting them in the door is the hardest part. Even though something like an application form or a choice to be made for computer input sounds small, it could be something that tips the decision of an already anxious patient away from treatment.

Patient forms and medical histories with no representation of diverse sexual orientation or gender are a sign that LGBT people are not acknowledged. It can help all organisations and businesses to show that they understand the importance of representation. It also demonstrates that we are following legal guidance in recognising our patients' protected characteristics. Collecting a range of demographic information can help us to avoid assumptions and initiate conversations around our patients' identities, using correct pronouns and discussing wider health issues relevant to them personally.

More places are realising the need to update their computer systems to be all encompassing of all clinical and administrative functions, so it is important to

be mindful that wherever you are you get to know what plans are under way for ensuring better capture of patients' diverse identities.

3. Talk openly about the connection between oral health and sexual health

Dentists are well placed to give a patient advice on sexual health based on their oral health. HIV, HPV and syphilis are all conditions that can be diagnosed in the mouth. However, patients may not be aware of this and dental students may not feel confident in initiating discussions on this topic. Proactively engaging in conversations with patients can help them to be more aware and informed about their oral health and the effects of STIs on the oral cavity. It also indicates that they are in a safe environment where they can discuss any concerns without fear of judgement.

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4. Share your knowledge with your LGBT patients

As a dentist, identifying, treating and signposting are crucial to our role. LGBT people have higher rates of smoking, alcohol consumption and substance use than the general population. Talking to your patients about the effect of substances on their oral health can help them to make informed decisions. For example, explaining that party drugs can lead to the gradual destruction of the tooth and damage to the gums. Your patients will understand that you are supporting them and providing the care that they need, even if they are not initially aware that they need it.

5. Help reduce HIV stigma

Many people worry about discussing HIV with any health professional. Some will have been refused appropriate care and services and be anxious to know if their dentist is

informed and supportive. HIV is easily treated and a patient on long-term HIV medication is doing their best to look after their health. HIV positive patients, whatever their identity, have the same right to medical attention as everyone else. It is important to understand the complications that HIV and HIV medications can cause in relation to oral health. Knowing where to refer patients for further support is vital for your reputation as a trusted health professional.

6. Understand Trans people's experiences

Trans people face a range of challenges when accessing mainstream services, and as a result may choose to avoid them altogether. Many trans people experience anxiety before accessing treatment due to fears of insensitivity, misgendering and discrimination. By better understanding your

trans patients, you can help to signpost them to appropriate, relevant and specific sources of support for their health and wellbeing.

7. Be aware of non-binary identities

The spectrum of gender identities is wider than many people may think.

It's not difficult to understand if we try not to assume a person's identity until they have told us how they define themselves. Instead of using the pronouns 'He' or 'She' use 'They' or 'Them'. Instead of Husband/Wife or Boyfriend/Girlfriend, use Partner. Even better ask your patients how they identify, most people won't be offended when they understand why you are asking and many will be delighted you asked them first before assuming their identity and potentially getting it wrong!

8. Acknowledge LGBT Parents

LGBT families continue to face discrimination from health care and again, using gender-neutral language e.g. parent or carer can help to avoid assumptions about the gender of parents and their partners. We all make mistakes and assumptions. The important thing is to acknowledge them, apologise, learn and move on.

9. Be True to Yourself

Your own sexual orientation, gender identity and trans status is unique to you and is nobody's business but your own. Being open at work or university can have its challenges but it can also relieve the daily stress of hiding who you are. No one wants to put their security or opportunity for advancement in jeopardy, so find out if your place of work or study has a written non-discrimination policy. Does it specifically cover sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression? Is there an LGBT+ group at your university or workplace? Being open can make you more productive, and can even benefit your future career because people can see you are open and honest with them. Talk to people you trust before coming out or talk to an LGBT helpline anonymously. There is a lot of support out there.

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10. Be an LGBT+ Ally

So what has all this LGBT stuff got to do with you if you aren't part of the community? Well it's even more important that you show yourself to be a person who LGBT People can trust. Allies play an important role in standing up for their friends, colleagues or patients' rights, providing effective services and supporting LGBT+ people to raise their voices and be heard. Allies can take many forms from organisations to individuals. There is a role for everyone, either supporting a friend if they come out as LGBT or knowing what to do if anyone makes a mistake, or if you observe someone else who keeps making jokes about LGBT+ people.



Kaiden's experiences

Kaiden, a patient who is transgender, is also a member of staff at the Dental Hospital. He has received dental

treatment with

students in the past and was willing to share his experiences.

'The care and treatment I received by the students at University Dental Hospital Manchester was great. As a transgender patient, I was a little anxious on whether or not the students would know how to deal with the situation. As it was early on in my transition, I hadn't legally changed my name yet so I could not fill in my registration form with my new name. As there was no option on the form to add if I had a preferred name or any transgender option, I took it upon myself to tell the student my situation. The student was very nice and very understanding and made me feel very comfortable. As I work at the dental hospital, I felt comfortable with bringing this up, as I know many of the staff and students. If I were not a member of staff, I would not have felt this was something I could do, due to there being no option of a preferred name or a questions asking regarding how I identify.

Once this was discussed I felt 100% comfortable and at ease with the student. He asked me if there was any way of changing my name on the system but due to me not changing it legally, we couldn't do that. He added that I am transgender and my preferred name to my notes and when I was sent for an X-ray the student let the desk know I had a preferred name. After this, we discussed treatment options and he informed me the work that I needed doing did not meet the criteria for his case and he would pass me over to another student. On meeting my new student she had already read my notes and was familiar with the situation, I did not have to have the same conversation again; she called me by my preferred name from the start.

On the student clinic, each bay has

a small whiteboard with the patient's information on it e.g. hospital number and full name. I noticed on my whiteboard she had only put the first initial and my surname, this made me feel that the students were accepting and that they understood. Throughout my appointments with the students I never felt judged for being transgender or uncomfortable, they asked me a number of times if there was any way of changing my name on the system and that they would ask the desk if there was any way around it.'

Dr Joanne Cunliffe, Honorary Consultant in Restorative Dentistry at University Dental Hospital of Manchester, adds: 'Dentistry and the oral cavity can be a window to the general health of a patient. Certain conditions can be diagnosed or flagged as a health issue before they manifest generally. Some of the issues the LGBT+ community experience could be diagnosed early if they go to the dentist regularly. It is also somewhere they can get advice on alcohol intake, smoking and recreational drugs.

As health care professionals, all the students at University Dental Hospital Manchester are trained to ask questions around alcohol, drug use and smoking. They are also taught to take detailed medical histories. As part of the basic sciences, they learn about sexually transmitted infections and other health conditions that affect the oral cavity and dental health.

All the students, both under-graduate and post-graduate, receive a one-day training from Terence Higgins Trust on awareness of dealing with a patient living with HIV. This has run for the past two years and has been very successful in reducing barriers such as stigma and prejudice.'



What do dental students say?

‘When I first volunteered to work with LGBT+ groups, I realised that although I found the experience daunting, it really didn’t have to be. I provided oral hygiene instruction to trans people I had never met before and learned to use gender-neutral language. We owe it to each individual who enters a dental setting to avoid making assumptions about gender and to learn from our mistakes. One particular encounter that stands out for me was helping a young international student who could not afford access to dental care. She had travelled from Sheffield and was in desperate need of some oral hygiene advice. Once we advised her on how she can take better care of her mouth, she was put in contact with the Undergraduate Dental Hospital in Sheffield for treatment closer to home. This highlights the importance of our work - not only to gain the valuable skills, but also to help the members of our local community who need it most. I feel that it is even more important now in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which

is having a significant impact on the lives of the most vulnerable members of the LGBT community. Learning to be inclusive of all members of society is essential for a number of things, but most

importantly for your patient’s health and wellbeing. We are going to be the next generation of dentists and if we don’t learn who will?’ **Katie Huane**

‘Working with the LGBT+ community was one of the most fulfilling opportunities that I have participated in. This was mainly because the group were very keen to learn more about improving their oral hygiene. It motivated me to practice valuable skills that I will definitely need throughout my dental career. At times, communication was a



little bit challenging due to language barriers but this pushed me to work through a situation to ensure that both the group member and I were comfortable. Looking back, I can see how important this experience has been for my professional development. Now that I know that these opportunities are available, I would be keen to either participate again in the future or encourage other students to do so.’ **Lydia Power**

‘Whilst volunteering at the LGBT Foundation, I provided simple dietary advice and oral hygiene instruction to refugees and asylum seekers. Whilst a seemingly simple task, the language barriers we sometimes faced encouraged me to think about all aspects of communication. Often we rely on verbal communication, but the experience made me appreciate how important body language and tone of voice can be to convey information. I was surprised by some of the inventive ways we managed to communicate, and these are skills I will take forward into my career. Although we treat a wide range of patients at the dental hospital, university life can be a little bit of a bubble. This experience increased my awareness of the barriers to healthcare certain patient populations may face. Getting involved in such projects can increase your understanding of a region’s dental need, whilst also helping you appreciate the complex pressures some patients face in life.’ **Natasha Whitcombe**



Acknowledgement

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Andrew Gilliver ■

Further information

To get in touch about LGBT Foundation’s Pride in Practice programme please email: pip@lgbt.foundation

To find out more about University Dental Hospital of Manchester visit: <https://mft.nhs.uk/dental/>

To find out more about the University of Manchester visit: www.bmh.manchester.ac.uk/study/dentistry/

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41406-020-0172-4>

