

Attitudes towards and Awareness of Gay and Lesbian Patients; A Survey of Physician Assistants

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1. Introduction

The homosexual subculture provides a unique challenge for health care professionals. The human nature of the healthcare provider gives rise to a multitude of emotions that may be evoked when providing healthcare to homosexual patients. The attitudes of healthcare providers may prevent homosexual persons from seeking and receiving healthcare. As noted by McNair, "Discrimination influences patterns of health seeking, either preventing access to healthcare or reducing openness and trust within the healthcare setting." [1] It is of concern when any persons avoid basic preventive health care such as prostate exams, blood pressure checks and pap smears. A study conducted in February 1982 found that 37% of the physicians surveyed were not comfortable with homosexual patients. [2] Research has been conducted on physicians and medical students regarding their attitudes about homosexuality, but a similar study has not been done on physician assistants. It is important to gauge the attitudes of physician assistants as they are a growing profession that provides a significant amount of primary health care.

2. Methodology and Results

The purpose of this study was to survey family practice physician assistants in the states of Kansas, Oregon and New Jersey. These states were chosen both for their geographical diversity and their similar numbers of family practice physician assistants. The names and addresses of the physician assistants were provided by the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA). A 25-question survey containing 11 demographical questions and 14 attitude questions was sent to all family practice physician assistants in the target states as identified by the AAPA. The attitude questions used a Leikert scale, with 1 being strongly agree with the statement and 5 being strongly disagree with the statement. The results were analyzed using Chi-Square analysis. The survey response rate was 57% (n=168). The average number of years in family practice was 10.73 years and the average age of the provider was 41.81 years old. Regarding physician assistant awareness of gay and lesbian patients, 82.3% and 84.4% of the sample, respectively, were aware of gay and lesbian patients in their practice. There was a relationship between physician assistants who had gay patients in their practice and comfort level in obtaining a sexual history from gay and heterosexual men ($p<0.0001$) as well as comfort in treating gay patients ($p<0.0001$). There was also a relationship between providers who had lesbian patients in their practice and comfort level in treating lesbian patients ($p<0.05$). The majority of respondents appeared to have a positive attitude towards gay and lesbian patients in obtaining a sexual history, in providing health care and in attending continuing medical education on gay and lesbian health care issues.

3. Conclusions

This preliminary study represents the first study of awareness and attitudes of physician assistants towards gay and lesbian patients. This survey showed that physician assistants are both aware of gay and lesbian patients and also appear to have positive attitudes towards them. Due to the small sample size, however, the results should be viewed with caution. A nationwide study is recommended before conclusions can be generalized for all physician assistants. Continued research and education regarding the health care needs of gay and lesbian patients is recommended.

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