

New Queensland study looks at older lesbian and gay people's care networks

A new study, funded by the University of Queensland, is looking at the ways paid and unpaid carers come together to provide support to older lesbian and gay people.

This reflects the growing awareness across Australia of the issues confronting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people as they grow older. A broad coalition of support - including LGBT seniors, LGBT community organisations, aged care providers, and university researchers - is emerging to challenge existing practices and promote social inclusion for all older people.

A key issue is the general invisibility of LGBT people in the health and aged care systems. If service providers assume older people are heterosexual (or asexual) or that gender identity is simply biological, then the particular experiences and needs of LGBT people will be ignored.

For many LGBT people, a lifetime of discrimination (remembering that sodomy was decriminalised in Queensland only in 1989) means that they expect to be discriminated against when accessing services and supports in later life. A study by the Queensland Association for Healthy Communities (QAHC) in 2008 identified that 65% of the LGBT people surveyed were concerned that their sexuality or gender identity would affect the quality of aged care or carers' services provided to them. Thus, a major concern is that this expectation of discrimination leads to a failure to access needed services or to hiding one's sexual or gender identity when in contact with these services.

While much of the discussion in the LGBT community has focused on the provision of LGBT-specific residential and retirement homes, the reality is that for most older LGBT people - as with other older Queenslanders - care will be delivered through networks of community-based providers, including unpaid carers. However, care-giving is typically understood as a family activity undertaken by opposite-sex partners and adult children. There is relatively little understanding of non-traditional care-giving relationships and dynamics, such as the care provided by friends and how friends move from social support to caring roles. In the QAHC survey, LGBT people reported that they expected to gain emotional, physical and financial support from a wide range of parties, including same-sex partners, LGBT friends, heterosexual friends, community agencies and, to a lesser degree, siblings, extended family members and adult children.

The new Queensland study, led by Mark Hughes and Sue Kentlyn, is looking at the diversity of the care networks of lesbian and gay people aged 60 and over, and how care providers respond to this person's sexual identity. The research involves interviews with the older lesbian or gay person, as well as their paid and unpaid carers.

For information about the project please contact Dr Mark Hughes (Email: m.hughes5@uq.edu.au or Phone: 0405 386 976) or Ms Sue Kentlyn (Email: dryad@internode.on.net or Phone: 07 3379 7273). The project has been approved by the University of Queensland Ethics Committee.