



## **Bi health report challenges doctors**

### **Better education, understanding sought for patients**

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By JOSHUA LYNSEN

Brad Brownfield is willing to tell just about anyone he's bisexual — but not his doctor.

The 36-year-old photographer living in Memphis, Tenn., said nine months after he came out to his family and friends, he still hasn't told his primary care physician.

"I've concealed my orientation because although he is the best doctor I've found, he is still in the military reserves and I hesitate to reveal my orientation because I am afraid of compromising the level of care I may receive," Brownfield said.

**A new report from the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force aims to help ease those jitters.**

**"Bisexual Health," written by Marshall Miller and other sexual health educators, challenges physicians across the country to better understand bisexual health issues.**

The 143-page report released last week — which includes physician tips and a rundown of the top bisexual health issues — is intended to end the fear and confusion that mainstream doctors exhibit toward bisexuals.

"It's a huge problem," Miller said. "But I think these issues can be solved through education. If you give people the tools to understand, then they can change the approach that they take to their clients."

Among the top bisexual health issues, according to the report, are drug and alcohol abuse, depression and anxiety issues, and other wellness issues.

Miller, who is bisexual, said the report clearly and thoroughly explains bisexuality and the physical and mental health issues bisexual men and women face.

"Is this stuff covered in medical school? Not necessarily," he said. "And I think our hope is that by starting the conversation, if we can get more people thinking and talking about this, then it shifts the bigger picture over time."

Several bisexual men and women from around the country said the report was long overdue.

"We, as bisexuals, don't even seem to exist or be recognized by the medical community," said Maria Myrback, a 40-year-old bisexual woman living in Melbourne, Fla.

Sheela Lambert, a 50-year-old bisexual woman living in New York, agreed. She said a local clinic has ignored her repeated pleas to add brochures about bisexual health to its racks.

"No matter how many times over the years I have asked them to have info that covers all the bases," she said, "they have never changed or added any literature, and brush me off when I make requests."

Barbara Lewis, a lesbian and physician's assistant at Whitman-Walker Clinic in D.C., said not all clinics so deliberately dismiss bisexual issues. Others inadvertently err through omission.

She said when patients don't openly identify as bisexual, many physicians assume orientation based on the patient's current or most recent partner.

"I think very often that mainstream providers don't like to take a very good sexual history," she said. "It makes them nervous."

Samantha Korb, a 20-year-old bisexual woman living in Greensboro, N.C., said these physicians must ease their nerves by learning "how to deal with someone who is bisexual and their health needs."

About 1.8 percent of men and 2.8 percent of women ages 18 to 44 identify as bisexual, according to the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth.

In addition to such statistics, Miller said the report offers many low-cost ways for clinics to integrate bisexual health issues into existing programs.

Among the suggestions are guidelines for creating health brochures, support groups and sex education programs that target or include bisexuals.

Many bisexuals said clinics should first purge any prejudices among physicians.

"Before we get to appropriate health care, we have to address the fact that medical and mental health professionals are still telling bisexual people that bisexuality doesn't exist and that they have to pick a side — gay or straight — and stay there," Lambert said.

Brownfield, who once heard a Mississippi health worker describe bisexuality as a "mental illness," agreed.

"First, understand and accept the fact that bisexuality does exist, and it is a valid, very real sexual orientation," he said. "Second, lose your preconceived notions. Do not assume that a bisexual person is not or cannot be monogamous."