

WE LIVE HERE TOO:

A guide to lesbian inclusive practice in aged care



About this guide

This guide was developed to help you provide a welcoming and inclusive service for older lesbians. The guide has been adapted from a report developed by the Ministerial Advisory Committee for GLBTI Health and Wellbeing in Victoria called: *Well proud: a guide to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex inclusive practice for health and human services* (2008). The *Well Proud* report outlines the requirement for all health and human services to be inclusive of their gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) people and presents six generic recommendations for GLBTI inclusive practice. To assist aged care services meet the needs of older lesbians we have adapted these recommendations for the care of older lesbians. These recommendations are to:

1. Provide a welcoming environment for older lesbians
2. Consult older lesbian consumers or their representatives
3. Ensure that older lesbians in your care feel safe and comfortable
4. Develop an admission policy that encompasses sexual preferences/ orientation
5. Develop organisational systems that promote inclusive practice
6. Educate staff and volunteers

In this current guide we explain how you can implement the recommendations in your service to meet the needs of lesbian clients/residents and their close others. We provide example scenarios to assist your practice. We also provide a useful references and resources list.

All older women bring with them a wealth of experience and have made a contribution to society. Lesbians are no exception. They deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. About 10% of the population are GLBTI, so it would be expected that this would be reflected in aged care services. Many lesbians have experienced exclusion and stigmatisation by mainstream society. Older lesbians have lived in a world where their relationships were not recognised, protected or supported by the law, taxation or health systems. Their sexuality may not have been accepted or valued by family members. Many have encountered significant discrimination including verbal or physical assault. These experiences may have hurt but also strengthened these women.

The legislative environment has now changed so that those who discriminate may be prosecuted. Aged care services can use this guide to understand how to meet their legislative requirements when caring for older lesbians. This guide can assist any service to ensure that they treat lesbians with respect, meet their professional duty of care and their quality standards.

Workers who foster an environment where lesbians in aged care feel safe and welcomed can make a great difference to older lesbians at the end of their lives. At times it may be difficult to imagine how life operates for others. We invite you to use this guide and the other resources listed here to assist your inclusive practice.

At the back of this booklet, you'll find a list of terms used as well as some other useful Resources.

Acknowledgements

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We also thank the lesbians who agreed to have their photos included and the photographers who donated their work.



Recommendation 1: Provide a welcoming environment for older lesbians



Definition

It is important that aged care service providers send the message to older lesbians that they are as welcome as older heterosexual women.

Suggested steps:

1. Display posters welcoming older lesbians, e.g.: *You don't have to be straight to use this service* (from Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria, see resource list) in the service foyer and at other key entry points in the service
2. Include images of older lesbians and information for older lesbians in resources for resident/clients
3. Provide copies of magazines from the lesbian community in the service foyer (see Resources on the last page)
4. Provide information on community festivals like Midsumma, the Melbourne Queer Film Festival or the Bendigo Queer Film Festival in the service foyer (see community magazines for further information)
5. Include information on Matrix Guild in resident/client information packs
6. Ensure questions on the intake or assessment forms are inclusive of older lesbians (see recommendation 4)
7. Respond positively to women who disclose that they are lesbian (see recommendation 4)
8. Invite a staff member to take on the role of coordinator of lesbian inclusive practice

PRACTICE EXAMPLE

Anne and Carol had been together for 20 years. After Carol had a stroke Anne needed to find a high care facility for her; one where they could feel comfortable spending time together. Anne looked on the web at a number of facilities and shortlisted three that were close to home. She was particularly interested in one that described a philosophy of respecting resident diversity. Images on the website showed ethnically diverse clients and staff as well as a photograph of two women hugging and smiling. Anne made an appointment with a nurse to visit the organisation and during the visit she disclosed that she and Carol were lesbians. The nurse smiled and pointed out a poster in the foyer that read: *You don't have to be straight to use this service*. The nurse affirmed to Anne that the organisation would welcome a lesbian couple and would be pleased to discuss their care needs and talk about how staff could be educated to understand the importance of welcoming Anne and Carol.

Recommendation 2: Consult older lesbian clients and their representatives



Definition

Consulting an older lesbian about her experiences and needs can be an effective way to understand how to individualise care. Consulting older lesbians can also be a useful way of understanding how to improve your service to ensure that it is lesbian friendly.

Suggested steps:

1. Take the opportunity when a woman identifies as a lesbian to ask:
 - a. What being a lesbian means to them
 - b. What difference being a lesbian makes to their care
 - c. What challenges they have encountered in your service or other aged care services
 - d. How your service could become more lesbian inclusive
2. Ensure that all staff are aware that lesbian couples have the same rights as heterosexual couples e.g. in care planning, visitation, accessing medical information etc. (not an exhaustive list)
3. Seek alternative ways to learn more about lesbian inclusive practice by:
 - a. Contacting the Matrix Guild Inc and requesting a speaker for a staff inservice
 - b. Reading stories from the *My People* report (see Resources)
 - c. Contacting *Val's Café* at Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria or {also} Foundation for education and information (see Resources)
 - d. Searching internet sites listed in Resources

PRACTICE EXAMPLE

Jeanette was the Director of Nursing of a low care facility when Trisha, a new resident, disclosed to staff that she was a lesbian. Trisha had a partner who visited most evenings. Jeanette made a time to meet with Trisha and told her that she had never cared for a lesbian before (as far as she knew). She invited Trisha to talk about what it was like for her to be a lesbian and how being a lesbian changed her care needs. Over a six month period Jeanette had a number of meetings with Trisha and her partner and built up a trusting relationship. Trisha shared her story with Jeanette and talked about her impressions of the care provided in the service. She suggested that most staff were supportive but felt that some appeared awkward when her partner visited and they held hands. Trisha did not want to provide feedback to staff directly about this; she was worried that it needed to be handled the right way and didn't want to affect the good relationship that she had with staff. To address these concerns Jeanette invited speakers from *Val's Café* to provide an education session for staff and to explore how to make their service more inclusive of older lesbians.

Recommendation 3: Ensure that older lesbians in your care feel safe and comfortable



Definition

The organisation has a responsibility to ensure that services are provided to lesbian resident/clients without discrimination from staff, other residents/clients, visitors or volunteers. When discrimination occurs, organisations have a responsibility to address the issue and prevent further occurrence.

Suggested steps

1. Invite staff to identify their own values and beliefs about lesbians
2. Encourage staff to put aside homophobic beliefs when caring for older lesbians
3. Ensure that a system is in place to identify any potential homophobia directed at older lesbians by other staff, residents/clients, visitors or volunteers
4. Develop a system to respond to homophobia when it occurs including a clear process for staff disciplinary action
5. Ensure that staff in shared services are aware of their responsibility to protect older lesbians from homophobia from other residents/clients
6. Provide older lesbians the opportunity to be connected to the lesbian community by identifying potential supports in the {also} Foundation directory and community magazines (see Resources).

PRACTICE EXAMPLE

Helen's friend Maria had dementia and was living in a nursing home. When Helen visited, she would take her friend's arm and they would wander around the facility chatting. On one of their walks a fellow resident made a number of derogatory remarks about the two being lesbians. The comments were overheard by several staff assisting a resident nearby. When the comment was made Helen noticed that Maria flinched and moved on quickly. Helen knew that Maria had encountered homophobia from her family and thought that the comments would have been a painful reminder. Worried that the staff witnessing the episode had not intervened, Helen reported the incident to the Director of Nursing. An incident report form was filled out and Helen was informed that there would be a staff meeting to discuss the incident and to identify how to prevent further incidents from occurring. After the meeting, several staff who had witnessed the incident approached Helen and Maria and apologised for any trauma caused and said that they now had strategies to reinforce to other residents that homophobic remarks were not acceptable. Helen felt reassured that she had helped to make sure that her friend was in a safe place.

Recommendation 4: Develop an admission policy that encompasses sexual preferences/orientation



Definition

A policy on including sexual orientation in assessment forms can assist staff to understand best practice principles. It will also make it easier for lesbians to disclose their sexual orientation. For those who do so, a clear policy will help them understand how this information will be used.

Suggested steps

1. Ensure that the intake interview and assessment forms are inclusive of all sexual orientations
2. Ask residents/clients whether they would describe their sexual orientation as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual or other
3. Rather than just ask if a resident/client is married, ask if they are single, same sex partnered, married, defacto, widowed or divorced
4. Provide staff with education so that older lesbians who disclose their sexual orientation receive a positive response
5. Check with lesbians residents/clients how they would like information about their sexual orientation shared by checking the following:
 - a. Do they want their sexual orientation discussed with other staff?
 - b. Would they like their sexual orientation documented in their care notes
6. Inform lesbian resident/clients (who want their sexual orientation documented) with whom the care notes will be shared

PRACTICE EXAMPLE

Angela was working in home care when a new policy on the assessment of sexual orientation was introduced. As part of the policy, clients were to be asked whether they were lesbian/gay or straight and whether they were male, female or transgender. Angela was worried about how clients would respond to these questions. She was worried that they would be upset. A month later Angela reported to her boss that only one client was upset and that she was able to reassure this client that the questions were part of a new policy on diversity. Angela also reported that one client had identified that she was a lesbian. In response to this disclosure Angela made a positive comment about the service's current efforts to develop inclusive practice and asked the client if she currently had a partner. After the assessment was completed Angela checked whether the client wanted her sexual orientation documented or shared with other staff. The client told Anne that she wanted this information documented because she wanted to make sure that anyone that came into her home knew that she was a lesbian and was comfortable with that. Anne told the client that this information would be documented on the assessment form and shared with other workers.

Recommendation 5: Develop organisational systems that promote lesbian inclusive practice



Definition

Organisations need to put in place systems to ensure that inclusive practice is embedded within organisational culture and that opportunities to improve inclusive practice are sought as part of the organisation's continuous improvement processes.

Suggested steps

1. Provide information on inclusive practice in:
 - a. Organisational values statement eg: explicitly refer to sexual orientation in statements about valuing diversity
 - b. Policies and procedures: include information on inclusive practice in policies related to service provision and service contracts
 - c. Position descriptions, orientation programs, staff performance appraisal: include statements about the organisations commitment to sexual diversity to ensure staff are clear about their responsibilities and to identify where staff education is required
2. Incorporate the monitoring of inclusive practice in continuous improvement plans
 - a. Invite staff to undertake an annual audit of inclusive practice using *Val's Café* audit tool (see Resources) or more frequently in response to comments or complaints
 - b. Invite lesbian residents/clients to complete a service audit or identify opportunities for the organisation to enhance inclusive practice
3. Have a positive employment policy to recruit and retain lesbian staff

PRACTICE EXAMPLE

As holder of the cultural diversity portfolio Zara was told that the annual consumer and staff satisfaction surveys revealed a number of suggestions that the organisation needed to become more inclusive of the 'gay community.' Zara's boss asked her to identify how the organisation might achieve this. Zara began by auditing the organisation using the *Val's Café* audit tool to identify areas where improvements were required. Next, she developed an action plan for her manager that included: displaying posters to welcome residents of diverse sexual orientation, reviewing organisational policies and processes to ensure they were inclusive, developing an admissions policy that encompasses sexual diversity and providing staff education. She also suggested that the organisation explicitly refer to inclusive practice in job ads and position descriptions to send a clear message to prospective employees. Zara met with her manager and they agreed that inclusive practice could become part of the mandatory education program and that their achievements would be monitored by repeating the audit annually. They also decided to develop questions specific to inclusive practice for the annual staff and client satisfaction surveys.

Recommendation 6: Educate staff and volunteers



Definition

Organisations need to provide education to ensure that staff and volunteers clearly understand the evidence regarding the needs of older lesbians, the rights of older lesbians to receive care without discrimination and how inclusive practice can be achieved.

Suggested steps

1. Invite staff to discuss myths, stereotypes and attitudes towards lesbians
2. Outline the legal requirements to provide care without discrimination
3. Discuss the evidence regarding the experiences of older lesbians accessing aged care (see *My People* report listed in Resources)
4. Provide staff with education to explore the general perceptions of aged care service providers towards older lesbians (see *Permission to Speak* report)
5. Invite staff to consider how they can put aside homophobic beliefs in order to provide inclusive practice
6. Ensure that staff understand their responsibilities to educate co residents and visitors in shared services
7. Ensure that education is accessed by all staff and volunteers and is regularly updated

PRACTICE EXAMPLE

Jenny was approached by a lesbian staff member who was concerned that other staff were making homophobic remarks about a lesbian client. The staff member, who was not "out" at work, was concerned that the homophobic views of some staff would negatively impact on the client's care. She had challenged a number of staff but felt like it wasn't making much of a difference. Jenny set up an education session for staff, which was attended by most staff. At the session staff were invited to talk about their awareness of homophobia in the community and explore how this might influence the care that they provided. Jenny then read staff a number of stories from the *My People* report about the experiences of older lesbians accessing aged care. She also read stories about staff attitudes from the *Permission to Speak* report and invited staff to discuss how discrimination might occur in their facility and what impact it might have on their lesbian client. Staff were then given copies of this guide and invited to discuss how well they were doing in relation to each recommendation. Jenny made a further session to catch staff that were unable to attend and scheduled a twice yearly event to accommodate new staff.



About Matrix Guild Victoria Inc

Matrix Guild Victoria Inc was founded by and for the benefit of lesbians over forty years of age. The Matrix Guild supports appropriate care and accommodation choices for older lesbians as well as enhancing their wellbeing and quality of life. Matrix is a charitable incorporated association. We can provide speakers for staff inservices.

Website: www.matrixguildvic.org.au or phone: 0419 992 966.

Terms & Resources

Terms used in this guide

Gay: a person whose primary emotional and sexual attraction is towards people of the same sex. The term is most commonly applied to and used by gay men, although some older women use this term.

GLBTI: an acronym for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people that is often used to describe sexual orientation and gender diversity.

Homophobia: fear and hatred of lesbians and gay men.

Inclusive practice: the provision of health and human services that include the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.

Lesbian: a woman whose primary emotional and sexual attraction is towards other women.

Resources

{also} Foundation: Works to enhance the lives of Victoria's diverse gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex communities to create and celebrate a diverse, strong, safe and inclusive community that contributes to and is respected by the broader community. {also} produce an annual directory of information and services for the GLBTI community (www.also.org.au or phone: 9827 4999).

Birch, H. (2009). Dementia, lesbians and gay men. *Alzheimer's Australia*. Paper 15 (available at www.glhv.org.au/node/581).

Best Practice Guidelines. Accommodating older gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans and intersex (GLBTI) People is an easy to read set of inclusive principles published after surveying aged care providers in Western Australia. It is available at <http://grai.org.au/2010/07/we-dont-have-any-of-those-people-here-research-papers/>.

Community magazines are important sources of information for the GLBTI community and some can be delivered free to your service (www.gaynewsnetwork.com.au or www.lotl.com.au).

Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria: education, information, website and clearinghouse news and information of particular interest to the health and well-being of GLBTI people; including free posters for services wanting to indicate they are GLBTI friendly (www.glhv.org.au).

Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review: In 2006 this journal had an edition dedicated to GLBTI ageing (available at www.rainbowvisions.org.au/GLIP_Review_Vol2_No2.pdf).

My People: Exploring the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex seniors in aged care services. (Barrett, 2008). Melbourne, Matrix Guild Victoria Inc and Vintage Men Inc (available at www.matrixguildvic.org.au).

National LGBT Health Alliance: Established by a number of organisations working in the area of LGBT health research, programs and services to advocate on behalf of GLBT communities at a national level, with politicians, researchers, funders, and in the media (www.glbthealth.org.au).

Permission to Speak: towards the development of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex friendly aged care services. (Barrett, Harrison, Kent, 2008). Melbourne, Matrix Guild Victoria Inc and Vintage Men Inc (available at www.matrixguildvic.org.au).

Val's café: a forum resourcing people providing services to older gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in Victoria. Includes a program of education, resource development, research and advocacy. For further information contact Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria or the {also} Foundation.

Well proud: A guide to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex inclusive practice for health and human services. Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Health and Wellbeing. (2009). Department of Health Victoria (available at www.health.vic.gov.au/glbtimeac).



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