

This week marks the annual National LGBT Health Awareness Week. When it comes to social justice and equality for the LGBT community, we are well-versed in policy issues like marriage rights, bullying of LGBT children and adolescents, and workplace discrimination. It is not surprising that these three issues are foremost in our collective thoughts as the issues are extensively covered in gay and mainstream media outlets.

Yet there is another critical issue regarding social justice and equality that is often overlooked in our community: timely access to high quality, competent and affirming health care. And, for our entire Whitman-Walker Health family, it serves as the strong foundation for our mission of caring for metro DC's LGBT community.

Far too many LGBT people don't get the comprehensive health care they deserve. Many health care practitioners may be unaware of LGBT health disparities, such as higher rates of smoking and an increased risk of certain types of cancer. Some health care professionals do not have open communication with their LGBT patients, and, sadly, some providers still harbor prejudices toward LGBT people. Luckily, there are several efforts underway to address these issues, such as more LGBT health education in medical schools. But, there is a way to improve your health care now.

Studies have shown that LGBT people will often put off regular health care or not disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to their health care practitioner out of fear of discrimination or harassment. Because of this, they may also not disclose such things as sexual behavior, substance use, mental health issues or domestic violence.

This is why it's vital to come out to your health care practitioner. You will have a stronger doctor-patient relationship based on trust and honesty, which will lead to improved health care and health outcomes. Also, medical practitioners will be able to acknowledge the health issues more common in LGBT patients and perform appropriate evaluations and screenings.

Once you come out to your health care practitioner, you will need to talk with him or her about specific issues. The Gay and Lesbian Medical Association (GLMA) has published lists of important LGBT medical issues. These lists are based on what GLMA's practitioners have identified as the most common concerns for each LGBT population. The lists can be found at GLMA's website, www.glma.org. These lists are certainly not comprehensive and you should feel free to discuss any issue with your practitioner.

Providing high quality and affirming care for the LGBT community was Whitman-Walker's founding principle back in 1978. Back then, our services were limited to screening and treatment of sexually transmitted infections and treatment for mental health issues and substance abuse.

Today, we have finally fulfilled our mission to be a full-service health care facility for the LGBT community. Here, you can see a practitioner for primary medical and dental care, including specialties such as gynecological care, viral hepatitis and HIV treatment. Patients can also benefit from an on-site pharmacy.

Whitman-Walker Health can also provide services that few other providers offer, like anal cancer screening for gay and bisexual men and HIV post-exposure prophylaxis. For the transgender community, we offer hormone and testosterone therapy and trans-affirmative physical exams.

Our Medical Adherence Unit can help you manage any chronic health condition, including HIV infection. We have a team of experts who can help you to stay engaged with your health care and on your treatment and understand your diagnosis so you can stay as healthy as possible. They can show you how to take your medications correctly; help you keep your doctor's appointments; and help you get other services you may need.

Our mental health services include one-on-one counseling, therapy groups, peer counseling (both one-on-one and support groups) and treatment for addictions.

You can even get legal assistance here. Our Legal Services department can help you with discrimination issues, immigration issues, living wills, powers of attorney, even name and gender changes on government documents for the transgender community.

Remember that you deserve nothing less than high quality, competent and affirming health care. Whether or not you come to Whitman-Walker Health, be open and honest with your medical provider. It will make a world of difference for your overall health and satisfaction with your care.