Sexual Orientation and Cancer

During treatment for breast cancer, Jean Ward went to an Atlanta hospital four times for pre-surgery tests and paperwork—and each time, she dreaded the questions. Married or single? (She was in a 20-year committed relationship with a woman.) Is your husband here with you?"

Ward felt comfortable with her identity as a lesbian, but from experience she feared awkward or hostile treatment if the clerk learned her sexual orientation. "You can feel their energy shift, their body language, everything. This wall goes up," explained Ward. "You have to navigate that. How much can I reveal?"

Such prejudice plays a role in putting lesbian women and gay men at increased risk for cancer, according to oncologist Kate O'Hanlan, MD, who has researched the issue. Prejudice, poor access to health care and several other risk factors add to a growing concern about cancer in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community.

O'Hanlan says insensitive treatment is fairly common, even from well-intentioned doctors, so lesbians and gay men may avoid the medical system completely. "Many lesbians have anticipatory fears, so they don't come out," she explained. "The gal who works at the doctor's office is the sister of the gal who works in your bank and you get fired."

While heterosexual women see a doctor regularly for prescription birth control, lesbians generally don't have the same need and may skip doctor visits altogether.

"What normally happens during a doctor's visit? They check the patient's blood pressure, cholesterol, do a Pap smear for cervical cancer, check the stool for hidden traces of blood, make recommendations for other cancer screenings," said O'Hanlan.

The result is that many lesbians miss routine preventive care that saves lives by finding cancer early.

Sexual Orientation Survey Excerpts
"Kaiser Family Foundation, November, 2001"

- 79% of lesbians and 82% of gay men report verbal abuse, such as slurs or name-calling, because of their sexual orientation.

- About one third (32%) say they have been the target of physical violence, either against their person or property, because someone believed they were gay or lesbian.

Lower Incomes, Lack of Health Insurance

Economic data shows the gay and lesbian community overall is "medically underserved," which increases the risk of developing and dying of cancer. In the (LGBT) community:

- Many people go without health insurance because most work policies do not cover unmarried partners. No state legally allows people of the same sex to marry.

- Many people are self-employed, artists, or crafts people who can't
find affordable insurance outside of an employer-sponsored group program.

- Incomes are lower overall than the general population.

Reliable findings about health in the (LGBT) community are coming in now because former US health and human services secretary Donna Shalala insisted in the early 1990s that questions about sexual orientation be added to important federal studies of health and lifestyle such as the Women's Health Initiative (WHI).

**Greater Number of Risk Factors**

Cancer-related findings from the WHI include:

- Lesbians appear to possess more risk factors for breast cancer including nulliparity (having no children), alcohol and cigarette abuse, menopausal HRT, and obesity.

- Lesbians and bisexual women had more breast cancer than heterosexual women, despite similar use of screening mammograms by study participants of any sexual orientation.

O'Hanlan said lesbians may have a heightened risk for other types of cancer in addition to breast cancer. "Lesbians weigh more, smoke more, drink more alcohol, are less likely to have children, less likely to see a clinician—these are major risk factors for uterine cancer, ovarian cancer, cancer of the endometrium and cervix, colon cancer, lung cancer, and many others."

Among gay men, liberal use of tobacco raises the risk for more than a dozen types of cancer. A 1999 survey found 41.5% of gay men were smokers, far higher than the tobacco use rate for men in general, which was 28.6%.

**Educating the Gay and Lesbian Community**

O'Hanlan works to raise awareness in the LGBT community about cancer risk, and the lifestyle changes people can make right now to lower that risk … moves such as quitting smoking, having regular cancer screening exams, losing weight or maintaining a healthy body weight, and for women, possibly curbing alcohol use to help protect against breast cancer.

She wants prejudice rooted out of the medical community from top to bottom. Medical specialty groups could help, she says, by writing policy statements confirming that homosexuality is a normal expression of human sexuality; that lesbians and gay men are normal, healthy citizens of American society. "The public perception of homosexuals is still characterized by revulsion and disdain," said O'Hanlan.

Those attitudes filter down to checkups, according to O'Hanlan, where routine questions can be humiliating for a lesbian, especially if she doesn't want to reveal her sexual preference. "At checkups they get these questions," explained O'Hanlan. "'Are you sexually active? Do you use birth control?' If not, ‘Why not?’"
Traci Hollis remembers how uncomfortable those questions made her feel as a young woman. "I said, 'I'm not using any birth control,' and the medical assistant started to quiz me about that.... I said, 'I haven't been having sex with men.' Then came, 'Well when was the last time you had sex with a man?' She acted like I was some sort of deviant."

More recently, Hollis went through treatment for a rapidly-spreading breast cancer and found caring, sensitive health care workers at every turn. "I truly can't find a negative that happened because of my sexual preference." She traces her excellent treatment to a change in public awareness of lesbians over the last eight to 10 years in her area—a change that is dissolving old prejudices. "People were wonderful!"

American Cancer Society staff and volunteers are working with underserved communities to understand and reduce the barriers that prevent people from having timely cancer screening tests or from getting appropriate cancer treatment. For information or to volunteer call 1-800-ACS-2345.

The Cancer Survivors Network (CSN) offers recorded discussions and interviews with lesbian survivors and their partners as well as a discussion board for lesbian survivors, partners and caregivers.