

How to choose a care provider

A guide for Choosing Doctors and Counsellors for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgendered Persons and People living with HIV/AIDS

Introduction

This handbook will give you information about choosing a medical or counselling care provider.

It is intended for use by gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered (GLBT) and two-spirited individuals, people who are HIV positive or living with AIDS, and the people important to them. Homophobia, transphobia and AIDSphobia can impact on the care we receive, and internalized homophobia can impact on our ability (or capacity) to receive quality care. This booklet will provide some tools for helping you to find an appropriate care provider.

Choosing a Medical Care Provider

Why a Primary Care Provider?

Some people choose a family doctor while others like to see a regular physician at a walk-in clinic. Others see different care providers according to their needs at the time. It is often a good idea to develop an ongoing relationship with one primary care provider who knows your medical history. A primary care provider can refer you to specialists and surgeons depending on your symptoms.

If you are seeking a primary care provider, you have the right to interview potential care providers. If you are comfortable with disclosing, you could tell the doctor "I am a (lesbian, gay, bisexual, PHA). If that's going to be problem for you, I would like to know now so as not to waste each other's time". There are often good reasons to disclose to your care provider, in order to receive the best possible medical care available. Whenever you first disclose to a care provider, make sure you discuss how this information will be written in your file, and with whom the information might be shared. If you are not comfortable with the care provider's response, tell them you are concerned about confidentiality and tell them how you would like this information recorded.

What to Look For

Here is a checklist of items to consider when you are shopping for a care provider. Once you've got a list of potential care providers, phone and check if they are seeing new patients. When you make an appointment, clearly tell them that you are coming to interview the doctor to select an ongoing primary care provider. Remember that it is difficult to interview a care provider when you are ill; it is better to do it when you're well.

- Try to get a good recommendation from a friend.

- Look for language that doesn't assume heterosexuality in ads, a good reputation with the GLBT community or persons living with HIV/AIDS community, and knowledge and sensitivity about sexual, gender and ethnic diversity.
- Check your comfort level: Is the care provider friendly? Do they treat you as an equal? Was the physical exam respectful? Do you feel like you belong there? Are there posters or other signs of appreciation of sexual diversity? Has the care provider researched gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, HIV/AIDS health? Do they understand how it is different? Do they have knowledge and experience dealing with issues that may be important to you such as self-esteem, risk behaviours, gay bashing, sexual abuse, STIs (sexually-transmitted infections), transgender issues, and addictions?
- Look for a medical care provider who:
 - has a practice in your neighbourhood, if possible.
 - has good hours of availability.
 - is careful of your privacy and confidentiality. (Ask them to tell you how they will record sensitive information in your chart and who else will have access to your chart.)
 - takes the time to listen to your concerns and answer your questions, or will find out if he/she doesn't know the answers.
 - offers treatment options.
 - values and welcomes your involvement in your health care.
 - doesn't inappropriately use gender-specific language when taking your sexual history.
 - is knowledgeable and can refer you to other care providers and specialists.
 - promotes healthy sexuality.
 - provides continuity of care.
 - will allow your partner or friend to come with you to appointments.
 - has hospital admitting privileges.
- The values and philosophies of the care provider may be important to you. You should discuss these at your first meeting. You may want to see a care provider:
 - who promotes preventative medicine, a healthy lifestyle, and personal responsibility for health.
 - who is open to other types of health treatments, and recognizes your right to use alternative health treatments.
 - who practices in a multidisciplinary environment—someone who considers mental and emotional needs as well as physical.

Preparing for an Appointment

If you are seeing a care provider for the first time, you should write down your medical history, as well as your biological family medical history. Be sure to bring your Provincial Health Services card, and Indian Status card (if you have one) to the appointment.

Write down your symptoms or problems and any questions in advance. If you have any ideas about possible causes, write these down too.

Make a list of all medications you are taking. Include how long you have been taking them, the dosage, and any side-effects you may have.

Evaluating the Medical Appointment

Think about these questions:

- Did you feel you were given enough time? An average doctor's visit is 15 minutes, with 30 minutes for a complete physical or periodic health exam.
- Were you able to see the doctor at the time of your appointment?
- Did you feel you could ask the questions you needed to ask?
- When you asked a question, did the doctor answer in a way you could understand?
- Did you feel the care provider was willing to work together with you in your health care?
- Did you talk about important life experiences or circumstances that might be linked to your symptoms now? Did you explain how your condition affects your life or work?
- Did the doctor offer different choices about treatment?
- Did you feel the physical examination was respectful?
- Did you feel comfortable with this care provider? Did you feel you can establish a good relationship with her/him?

If you answered "No" to many of these questions, this care provider is likely not suited to your needs.

How to Get What You Need

Developing a good doctor-patient relationship requires effort, honesty, understanding and some tolerance from you and your physician.

If you want a second opinion, let the care provider know.

Ask questions about what's wrong, about tests, about treatment.

Bring a friend or your partner with you to the appointment. Talk with them before about what you want for this appointment, and evaluate with them after. They may help by seeing things in a different way. Ask yourself if you had prepared enough for this appointment. Would you do anything differently next time?

Polices & Rights You Should Be Aware Of

Confidentiality

It could be harmful to you if a care provider breaks confidentiality and talks about your medical file or illness. Any disclosure of confidential information —no matter how unimportant it may seem, whether it occurs in public settings, over the telephone, on an answering machine, by mail, e-mail or fax—must have the patient's consent except when disclosure is required by law (for example, a court order).

Patients should understand that care providers sometimes need to share information with other workers in order to give the best possible care. This is not a breach of confidentiality unless the information is shared with others outside your provider's team.

Medical Records

Information in the medical record is strictly confidential. Doctors prefer doctor-to-doctor transfer of records so there is less chance of breaking confidentiality. Disclosure may be made to other parties only with your written consent or when compelled by law.

Your medical record belongs to your doctor. You are allowed to look at it and get copies of parts of it. The doctor may require that a staff member be with you when you look at the record. You will need to schedule an appointment to review your medical record. You may have to pay the cost of a staff member's presence or for the copying of the chart.

Others who are allowed to look at your records include: the College of Physicians and Surgeons if they have to evaluate your care; the court, to learn how and why care was given; your Provincial Health Services to examine billings; insurance companies, employers and others that you want information sent to; and other doctors or health care workers involved with your care.

If your record contains information that the doctor thinks may be harmful to you or somebody else, you may not be allowed to see it, or the doctor may take out parts before showing the record to you.

Informed Consent

Informed consent means the medical provider must tell you the advantages and disadvantages of a particular treatment or course of action, answer your questions, and get your permission to continue. They cannot guess or assume that you would give permission, they must ask you.

Advance Directive

If you are in a relationship, same-sex or other, and are not legally married or not in a civil union, your partner is not recognized by law as being able to make medical decisions for you if you can't do it for yourself (if you have a disabling illness or accident). Normally the authority for making such a decision would fall to your parents, but you may not want them to make decisions for you.

An Advance Directive lets you make important decisions in advance, or to name your partner (or someone else) as the person to make medical decisions when you cannot.

An Advance Directive may also include a Living Will, Treatment Directive, or Durable Power of Attorney.

An Advance Directive should be part of your medical record, and you should carry a copy with you are suddenly admitted to a hospital. A hospital's policies sometimes do not recognize all parts of a legally valid Advance Directive. You have the right to know if a hospital's policies might limit your Advance Directive.

An Advance Directive form is available through your doctor, your Provincial Medical Association, or by contacting your Provincial Health Services.

Complaints Process

Most complaints come from misunderstandings or because the doctor and patient haven't fully discussed an issue. If you have a problem with your doctor, first ask for an appointment to talk about it with her/him. If you are not satisfied after this meeting, you can file a complaint with your provincial or territorial medical regulatory authority (for example College of Physicians and Surgeons. You can find a list at http://rcpsc.medical.org/links/provli_e.php). Some times you may not want to talk to the doctor before filing a complaint (for example, if he/she showed sexually inappropriate behaviour or obvious homophobia).

To file a complaint, write a letter to the regulatory authority and include your name, address, and telephone number; the date(s) of service, the complaint, the name and address of any other doctor(s) you saw about the problem. If you want to talk about your complaint before sending the letter, or if you need help preparing a Statement of Complaint, phone the regulatory authority directly. All information is kept confidential. The Complaints Committee looks at all of the complaints and tries to resolve them by informal action like education or recommendations. The Committee's opinion will be sent to you, in writing, and a copy will be sent to the doctor.

Choosing a Counsellor/Therapist

Who Uses Counsellors

There are many different reasons for seeking therapy. Maybe your partner left you, you lost your job, you're feeling isolated and depressed, or you are trying to change a problem like drugs or alcohol or compulsive behaviour. In addition, we live in a culture that is generally homophobic and AIDSphobic, and this can be hard on our mental well-being and can further stress our ability to cope with losses and difficult events in our lives.

It is important that our therapist or counsellor does not add to our stress. In order to be really helpful, therapy must support who we are. The counsellor should understand that homophobia and AIDSphobia damage self-esteem and should reflect this in their counselling.

Therapist" and "counsellor" are general names and can mean someone who practices one of many different kinds of counselling. Here are some definitions of commonly used counsellors:

Psychologist: Psychologists must have a PhD. in clinical or counselling psychology. Psychologists assess, diagnose and treat the issues individuals face.

Social Worker: Social workers have four years of university, often with postgraduate study or additional training in clinical or counselling social work. They often work for social service agencies, although some work on their own. Social workers usually look at all aspects of someone's life.

Psychiatrist: Psychiatrists are medical doctors with special training in counselling. They have a medical degree and an additional four years of psychiatric training. They can prescribe medication. To see a psychiatrist you must be referred by a doctor. Psychiatrists usually deal with emotional and/or nervous disorders.

Counsellor/Therapist: Anyone can call themselves a counsellor or therapist regardless of training. They may be trained in a particular kind of counselling, or may have developed skills on their own. There is no governing organization for counsellors and therapists.

Psychoanalyst: Usually someone from one of the previous categories who has taken specialized postgraduate training in psychoanalysis. They tend to emphasize the unconscious as a way to understand someone's problems.

Choosing a Counsellor or Therapist

When you are looking for a counsellor or therapist, think about what is important for you: a counsellor of the same gender? Same sexual orientation? Same racial, cultural or ethnic background? Feminist? A parent?

What background, experience and training does this counsellor have? Do they have special training in sexual orientation or HIV/AIDS issues? Are they a member of a professional association? Make sure you are satisfied with their answers to your questions. Remember, anyone can call themselves a counsellor, and there is no governing body. Be careful of any counsellor who claims that her/his method of counselling is the only right way.

Ask friends and others in your community if they know a good counsellor. Ask what they liked about that counsellor and what kinds of things they did that were helpful.

Get recommendations from organizations which serve the gay, lesbian, bisexual or HIV/AIDS communities.

If you are comfortable with coming out, you could tell the counsellor right away "I am (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, HIV positive). If that's going to be problem for you, I would like to know now so we don't waste each other's time."

Ask the counsellor to describe the kind of counselling they practice. There are many different techniques and approaches. Each works for some people, but one approach may be a better fit for you than others.

Ask what their beliefs and politics are. Where do they stand on racism, sexism, sexual orientation, etc.? A counsellor who treats you with dignity, listens respectfully, and values your right to self-determination are qualities you want to look for before deciding to work with them.

Ask the counsellor how many sessions they think you may need.

Ask the counsellor if they are willing to hear your feedback about how you think the counselling is going.

Preparing for the First Visit

Write down why you want counselling and what you think may have caused this or contributed to it. Think about your goals for counselling/therapy and write these down as well. It's also okay if you don't really know, or if you are unclear. The counsellor should be able to help you to define your goals.

How to Get What You Need

It is important that you feel you are getting what you need from counselling or therapy. If you are "shopping around" for a counsellor, let them know you are doing this.

You have the right to ask the counsellor many questions. You have the right to ask personal questions, but the counsellor also has the right not to answer.

Tell your therapist clearly what your goals for therapy are and/or what issues you want to explore. The clearer you can be about your needs and the more your needs match the therapist, the more helpful counselling is likely to be.

The counsellor should also let you know what they expect. Telling each other your goals and expectations is called "contracting" Contracting means both the client and counsellor have an agreement and understanding of what the therapy should accomplish.

As clients, we need to remember that the process of change takes time and that sometimes it might feel like there is no progress. It is important that you can talk to your counsellor about these feelings.

Talk about and agree on the fee and payment arrangements at the first visit.

If you regularly examine your progress, you should notice that you can understand your feelings better and you are developing better ways to cope. You should have a sense of change and increased satisfaction in your life.

Confidentiality

The client file is a written record of what happened in the counselling/therapy sessions and may include comments from the counsellor/therapist. The client file must be kept confidential unless a court orders certain information to be released. You may or may not have the right to look over and/or obtain a copy of your file, so it is best to ask your counsellor/therapist about their policies.

Ask your counsellor how they maintain confidentiality. Most therapists are governed by a code of ethics that guarantees your protection, but some are not.

Therapists may be required to testify if subpoenaed to court and must report circumstances where there is an immediate danger to the physical safety of an individual. Otherwise, they must keep information shared by you confidential, although they may share information with a supervisor or other workers in your care team.

Governing Bodies

Psychiatrists: To file a complaint check for your provincial/territorial College of Physicians and Surgeons at http://rcpsc.medical.org/links/provli_e.php

Psychologists: To file a complaint check for your provincial/territorial governing body at <http://206.75.45.181/showPage.asp?id=2057&fr>

Social Workers: To file a complaint against check for your provincial/territorial governing body check <http://www.casw-acts.ca/>

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The Winnipeg Gay/Lesbian Resource Centre serves as a centralized agency which offers information, referrals, support groups and peer counselling. The Resource Centre also offers Breaking Barriers, an anti-homophobia training program for health care and social service providers. For information call or write:

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