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## Healthcare Experiences of Transgender Patients



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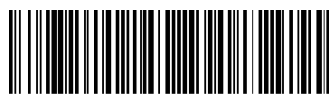
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### ABSTRACT

Transgender people are often marginalized and are the recipients of disparities in many facets of life, including access to and experience of healthcare. These disparities are systemic so creating a completely equitable healthcare environment for transgender patients is a multifaceted task. In this study, the experience of transgender patients in healthcare settings was analyzed. The method of study for this paper was a systematic review of the literature. The purpose of this study was to investigate how a patient who is transgender is typically treated in a healthcare setting. The patient intervention comparison outcome (PICO) question is: for patients who are transgender, how does their healthcare experience compare with other patients? Three themes that represent the unique barriers faced by these individuals were identified as lack of education among healthcare workers in relation to caring for transgender patients, transgender patients' fear of maltreatment leading to avoidance of healthcare, and poorer overall health seen in the transgender population. Changes must be made to create a healthcare environment that treats all patients with equality, respect, and compassion. Based on the review of the literature, it can be determined that some proposed ways of making these changes to improve the healthcare experience of transgender patients include educating healthcare providers, creating a welcoming and safe environment, and increasing their access to treatment options.

## INTRODUCTION

Approximately nine million lesbians, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals have been identified in the United States [1]. This is a significant portion of the population so *the perspectives and needs of LGBT people should be routinely considered in public health efforts to improve the overall health of every person and eliminate health disparities* [2]. The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of transgender patients in healthcare settings, discuss barriers that hinder their care, and address interventions to improve their overall care. The PICO question was: for patients who are transgender, how does their healthcare experience compare with other patients? This topic should be important to healthcare professionals as many will care for transgender patients in their careers and should be properly educated in providing competent care for this patient population.

Much of the literature on this topic addressed how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) patients generally face more barriers to healthcare [1] and are marginalized as compared to other patients [3]. Educating practitioners, creating a welcoming environment [1], and focusing more on the patient's needs rather than focusing on the personal discussion about their identity [4] are topics addressed in many of these articles. One of the largest gaps in the literature that was addressed in this study was early and practical education for healthcare professionals regarding the care of LGBT individuals. Many healthcare professionals do not receive education about caring for transgender patients until after they are in their practice [5].

### 1. BACKGROUND

Transgender patients, as well as other members of the LGBTQ community, have historically faced significant discrimination, and their healthcare experiences have been patchy at best [6]. However, starting in 2013, healthcare agencies began adopting anti-discrimination policies for LGBTQ patients and staff. Since then, the LGBTQ population has made steady progress toward social equality, and half of the states in the U.S. have implemented anti-discrimination policies for LGBTQ people [6].

Although systemic changes are starting to be made, cultural and societal mindsets still prevent transgender individuals from equitable treatment, and the healthcare community is not immune to these mindsets. For example, in a study of 6,000 transgender individuals, 19% had been refused care, 33% delayed seeking medical care for fear of maltreatment from

previous experience, and 2% had experienced physical assault in a doctor's office or hospital [4]. Each of these statistics is startling. One statistic that stands out is roughly one-third of the transgender people in this study delay seeking medical care for fear of how they would be treated. This finding is corroborated in other studies [7]. They found that transgender individuals often avoid healthcare altogether as much as possible to prevent potential abuse or maltreatment.

For the health and safety of this marginalized group of people, changes need to be made to make transgender individuals feel safe seeking medical help. Lee, Park, Choi, Yi, and Kim [8] discussed the experiences of transgender individuals as it relates to sex reassignment surgery. They identified high cost, prejudice of healthcare professionals, and limited knowledge of healthcare professionals as barriers to their transition-related care [8]. The experience of these transgender individuals in this study further supports the points made about the discrimination this portion of the population faces.

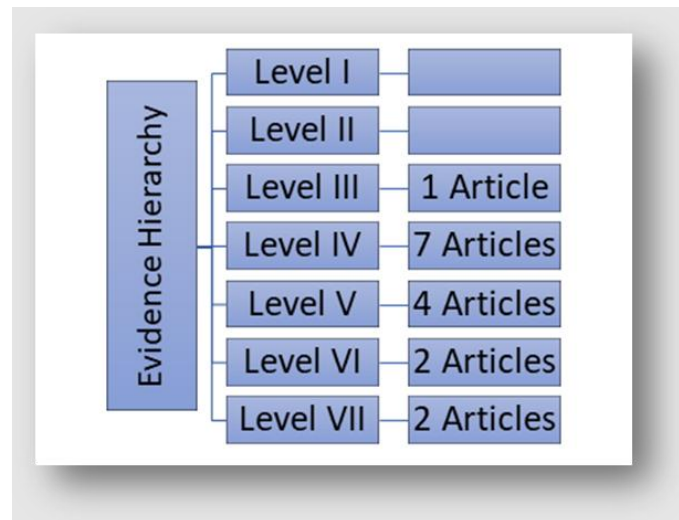
## 2. METHODS

The study method chosen to analyze the subject is a systematic review of the literature of transgender patient experiences in healthcare. The databases and search engines primarily used in this study were the Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI), Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI), and the Academic Search Premier. The keywords searched were *transgender*, *healthcare experience*, *healthcare*, *discrimination*, *LGBTQ treatment*, and *barriers*. There was a total of 16 articles and one book used (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Overview of the Articles used in the Healthcare Experience of Transgender Patients**

<b>Number of articles included in the review</b>	16 articles and 1 book
• Number of articles in the third tier	1
• Number of articles in the fourth tier	7
<b>Number of articles supporting themes</b>	
• Lack of education among healthcare workers	12
• Fear of maltreatment leading to avoidance of healthcare	10
• Poorer overall health	6
<b>Definition of terms</b>	
• Transgender	A person whose gender identity or the expression is different than the gender assigned at birth
• LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender
• LGBTQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer

The levels of evidence of the articles were evaluated using the evidence hierarchy pyramid [9]. Ideally, only articles in the top four tiers of the evidence hierarchy would be used for a literature review. However, a limitation of this literature review was that this topic is still relatively new and has not been thoroughly researched yet, so it was difficult to limit the resources to only the top four tiers of evidence. One article was in the third tier, which was the highest tier of the articles selected, and seven articles were in the fourth tier. The other eight articles were in the fifth, sixth, and seventh tiers (see Figure 1). The book by Housel and Harvey [6] is in the lowest tier of the hierarchy of evidence. It is also one of the oldest resources used, though it is still within the last five years. Regardless of its status in the evidence hierarchy, it is still useful for providing background and framework for this topic.



**Figure 1. Level of evidence for articles used in the transgender healthcare experience review**

*Note.* For the level of evidence, I is the highest and VII is the lowest

### 3. FINDINGS

The review of the literature found that 12 different articles identified a need for education among healthcare workers concerning the care of LGBTQ patients. The articles displayed different areas that transgender patients reported experiencing limited access to care and discrimination among doctors and nurses, but more specifically physicians were addressed. Regarding healthcare for transgender clients, discrimination and mistreatment have been documented, but information on fixing the topic at hand is limited and under-researched.

Barriers prove to hinder improving care. Whether these barriers have been made by transgender patients or the healthcare members, they make it difficult for change to occur. In addition to the barriers that have been identified, *lack of knowledgeable healthcare providers, lack of cultural awareness, and negative attitudes* are other barriers transgender patients face [5]. Transgender patients often face barriers socially and economically due to surgeries, medications, recovery, lack of support systems, and social isolation [10]. Interventions regarding some of these barriers relate to education. Proper education for healthcare professionals can severely decrease these barriers and begin to change the stigma associated with transgender patients and other members of the LGTBQ community.

Transgender patients experience isolation related to fear, lack of knowledge and unemployment. Meyer, Brown, Herman, Reisner, and Bockting [11] clarified this by *expressing transgender people experience pervasive social and economic marginalization and exclusion, including prejudice and stigma, discrimination, unemployment, and violence, that adversely affect their health and well-being*. On top of all the discrimination transgender patients already face, fear is another trend in relation to care between the physician and the transgender patients. Transgender patients experience the fear associated with physician visits due to discrimination and lack of concrete practice standards revolving around transgender patients. This fear is not solely associated with transitioning. The fear can be applied to overall wellness visits. There is an unshaken fear residing with transgender patients. Physicians are often hesitant and unsure regarding providing care for transgender clients.

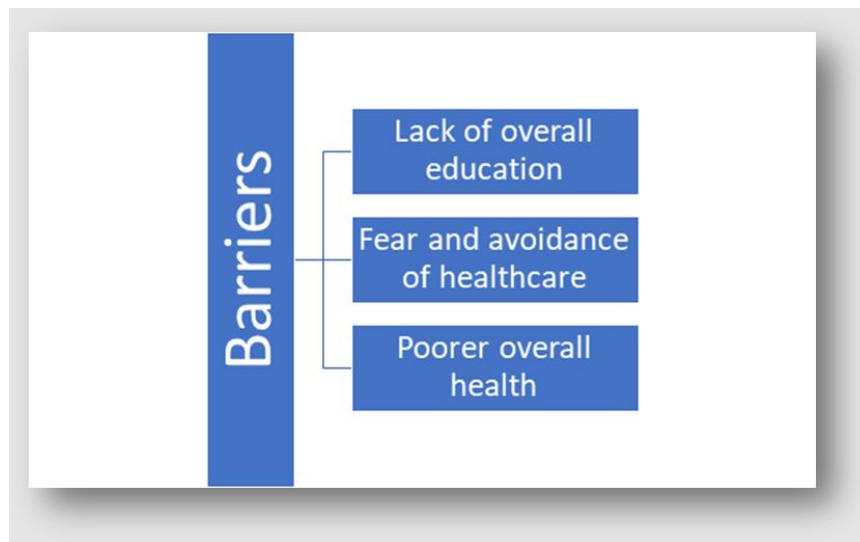
Many of the articles indicated a need for further education among physicians and nurses. The problem is a lack of concrete knowledge when it came to the implementation of care. It was hard to determine why physicians and nurses have a difficult time providing healthcare to these individuals. Ultimately, it is difficult to assess where the lack of cultural competency originates. Safer et al. [12] concluded, *although transgender patients suffer from a dearth of competent providers for their health care, the specific explanations for that gap remain to be studied.*” Some of the lack of understanding may stem from the schools that healthcare members graduated from. Strong and Folse [5] reported, *Studies report low levels of knowledge related to LGBT patients, as well as negative attitudes among nurses and nursing students toward LGBT patients*. The cultural awareness and sensitivity towards transgender individuals should be addressed while the healthcare professionals are still enrolled in school.

#### **4. THEMES**

A conclusion that can be addressed is the overall mistreatment of transgender patients relating to the barriers in the healthcare systems. Transgender patients are often marginalized and cast aside by healthcare professionals. The main reasons why transgender patients receive less healthcare are due to multiple barriers. Each of these barriers represent that transgender patients are often treated differently than other patients, which relates to the PICO question: for patients who are transgender, how does their healthcare experience compare with other patients? The barriers can be expressed into three themes that have been identified through the review of the literature. These themes are a lack of education of healthcare professionals regarding the care of transgender patients, transgender patients' fear



of maltreatment in healthcare settings leading to their avoidance of healthcare, and poorer overall health in the transgender population (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Themes regarding health care experiences of transgender patients**

### **5.1 Theme 1. Lack of Education of Healthcare Professionals**

The first theme identified was a lack of education. Many of the studies in the research concluded that healthcare workers do not have adequate training when it comes to caring for transgender patients. Since there is a lack of education among medical professionals, it is hard for the medical staff to understand the emotional and physical needs of transgender patients. Other patients may have difficulties regarding their care, but the topic of transgender healthcare is very under reached, causing uncertainty and hesitancy within the medical staff regarding transgender patients when they come into the hospital or physician's office. *Healthcare facilities should incorporate formal training in transgender health issues and provide inclusive structural facilities, such as unisex restrooms* [13]. There was no other clear evidence regarding solutions to this issue. Twelve studies [1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18] mentioned lack of education of healthcare workers in their studies.

### **5.2 Theme 2. Transgender Patients' Fear and Avoidance of Healthcare**

The second identified theme was that transgender patients often fear maltreatment in healthcare settings, which leads to the avoidance of and delay in seeking healthcare. Generally, other patients do not fear being mistreated in healthcare settings. However, transgender patients can face great uncertainty when they seek healthcare, ranging from a

negative experience to violence. When they enter a healthcare setting, it is a gamble as to how they will be treated by the healthcare providers and other staff. Due to this uncertainty, these individuals are understandably hesitant to seek out healthcare agencies for help unless they have no other options. Ten studies [1,3,4,5,7,8,14,16,17,18] identified fear and avoidance of healthcare as a strong theme among transgender patients.

The avoidance of healthcare and subsequent delay in treatment could be very dangerous for these individuals if they are facing a serious medical issue. This makes this theme particularly concerning. It is largely due to the preconceived notions or ignorance of the healthcare professionals and staff regarding the sensitivity and cultural considerations of transgender individuals [7].

### **5.3 Theme 3. Generalized Poorer Health for Transgender Individuals**

The third theme identified was generalized poorer health of transgender individuals in relation to the rest of the population. While this theme was not as common as the other two, six studies [1,7,8,12,14,17] highlighted how transgender patients often have poorer overall health in comparison to the rest of the population. Goldberg et al. [14] extensively discussed the mental health issues in transgender populations stating *85% of participants reported mental health challenges*. The authors discuss how these mental health issues are often developed because of a fear of violence and lack of support from family and friends. Goldberg et al. [14] also noted that there is a negative stigma applied to transgender patients and this stigma contributes to negative mental health outcomes.

In summary, three themes were identified from the literature that answers the PICO question: For patients who are transgender, how does their healthcare experience compare with other patients? The themes identified were lack of education among healthcare workers in relation to caring for transgender patients, transgender patients' fear of maltreatment leading to avoidance of healthcare, and poorer overall health seen in the transgender population as listed in Figure 2. Lack of education about caring for transgender patients was the most significant theme as it was present in 12 of the 16 articles.

## **6 DISCUSSION**

Regarding the data collected about the healthcare experiences of transgender patients, the research suggests that transgender patients do not always receive the same level of care as



typical patients would receive. This unequal treatment is not appropriate and demonstrates a lack of professionalism among healthcare workers. Healthy People 2020 [19] has four overarching goals set in place for healthcare. One of the four overarching goals is to *achieve health equity, eliminate disparities, and improve the health of all groups* [19]. If healthcare is not achieving health equity for transgender patients, then this overarching goal is not being achieved.

One of the biggest limitations to this systematic review of the literature is that there is little recent research done on this topic of transgender care in the field of healthcare. Goldberg et al [14] discussed this lack of understanding and knowledge about transgender patients in healthcare in their research article. *Yet health providers and therapists often lack understanding of [nonbinary gender] identities* [14]. As there is little research done on this subject, there are limited conclusions that can be drawn.

Another limitation is the population sizes of the studies conducted [17]. The sample sizes in many of the articles were small in comparison to the actual population base of the transgender population. This may be partly due to the little amount of research done on the subject. Regardless, there is not a large enough population pool to represent the actual proportion of the transgender population. This could lead to broad generalizations and possible misrepresentation of how transgender patients are treated and cared for.

The gap in the knowledge base is large, simply because there has not been enough research done on the subject. Vermeir et al. [17] noted in their research that transgender individuals tend to avoid healthcare because of the fear of maltreatment. This only leads to an even smaller population pool in comparison to other patients. There is little that can be done to bridge this deficit in knowledge other than intentionally research transgender needs in healthcare in the most respectful way possible.

The biggest issue is the maltreatment of transgender patients in healthcare. This preternatural amount of unjust maltreatment of transgenders needs to be acknowledged and addressed by all members of the healthcare team. A possible solution is an education requirement for all members of the healthcare team. Strong and Folse [5] discussed education for healthcare workers about transgender patients and the importance of being educated on the subject. They used a PowerPoint slideshow to educate undergraduate nursing students about transgender individual's needs and disparities in healthcare [5]. The education presentation positively

changed the attitudes of the undergraduate nursing student's perception of transgender individuals in healthcare. Some of the students in this study noted that they had little to no education about transgender patients in their undergraduate studies. They also noted that education was extremely beneficial to them and that they had wished the subject was more incorporated into their nursing program. The students indicated that the educational program would help them to better understand how to take care of and treat transgender patients in the clinical setting.

While there is little research done on transgender patient care in healthcare, there is enough research to know that there is a considerable amount of inequitable treatment toward transgender patients. Thus, healthcare members could be reminded that they need to treat transgender patients with the same dignity and respect as they would treat all other patients. One final suggestion to help reduce the amount of maltreatment of patients in healthcare is co-worker accountability. If members of the healthcare team notice any patient is being mistreated, it is that person's responsibility to confront their coworker about the incident. If the perpetrator is indifferent or in denial about the incident, then the respective supervisor should be notified so proper actions can be taken.

## 7 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, transgender maltreatment in the field of healthcare is an issue in society. Several key factors contribute to this discrimination. This leads to a fear of being mistreated in the hospital, which leads to the transgender population being less likely to seek out medical attention when they need it most. This overall lack of healthcare for transgender patients has led to the development of more chronic diseases that may have otherwise been managed. Goldberg et al. (2019) discuss how in comparison to other patients, transgender patients end up developing mental health disorders far more often.

The issue of unjust care is a considerable problem that requires immediate attention. In comparison to other patients, those who are transgender tend to have much worse healthcare experience. They are frequently mistreated, not respected, and not cared for in the same manner. However, some steps can be taken to help deliver proper healthcare to transgender patients. There is a deficit in knowledge about transgender patients in healthcare. For the healthcare workers, steps that can be taken to help improve the care for transgender patients are addressing any maltreatment directly and educating the healthcare associates on the issue,

as well as to remind them that everyone has a right to healthcare. Ethically, nobody should reject, disrespect, or mistreat a patient the way transgender patients are mistreated. Transgender patients have as much of a right to compassionate and excellent healthcare as any other patient.

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