

# LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL WOMEN'S HEALTH PROJECT

## Dear health care provider:

This information sheet has been sent to you as part of the Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Health Project, which was funded by Health Canada and Status of Women Canada, and co-ordinated by the BC Centre of Excellence for Women's Health. The project was designed to raise awareness about the health needs of lesbian and bisexual women, and improve their access to quality health care.

## Background

Many health care providers have committed themselves to providing health care spaces and services that support human rights. These providers make every attempt not to discriminate against people on the basis of such things as race, gender, income, age, religion and culture. However, researchers have found that large numbers of lesbian and bisexual women continue to be discriminated against in the health care system. The result is that many do not receive the health care they need and to which they have a right as Canadian citizens.

## Tools

The Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Health Project has designed some tools to help you, a health care provider, increase your level of awareness about health care issues important to lesbian and bisexual women, and increase their access to your services.

**1. *Caring for Lesbian Health: A Resource for Canadian Health Care Providers, Policy Makers and Planners, revised edition*** This highly acclaimed booklet was originally published by the province of British Columbia. The revised national edition briefly reviews the legacy of homophobia within the health care system, identifies the unique health concerns of lesbian and bisexual women and provides information about what you can do to help improve their access to quality health care.

**2. *Empower Yourself ... Postcards*** These four attractive and informative postcards address health issues important and specific to lesbian and bisexual women: parenting, maintaining healthy friendships, looking for a doctor and making healthy choices. The postcards are designed to appeal to and be used by your lesbian and bisexual women clients.

**3. *Tip Sheet for Health Care Providers*** See the attached for tips about how you can improve health care for your lesbian and bisexual women patients.



## Ordering Information

Publications

Health Canada

Postal Locator 0900C2

Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0K9

Tel (613) 954-5995

Fax (613) 941-5366

[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/women](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/women)

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British Columbia  
Centre of Excellence  
for Women's Health

BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Ministry of Health  
and Ministry Responsible for Seniors



Sincerely,

**The Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Health Project**

[www.lesbianhealth.ca](http://www.lesbianhealth.ca)

# LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL WOMEN'S HEALTH PROJECT

## Tip Sheet for Health Care Providers

By reading the *Caring for Lesbian Health* booklet and distributing the health promotion postcards, you have already taken important steps towards helping improve care for your lesbian and bisexual women patients.

Here are some other steps you can take:

- Avoid making assumptions about gender or sexual identity or about sexual/health behaviours. Let the patient tell you about herself and her issues.
- Ask questions about sexual behaviour, not sexual identity. Instead of asking "Are you sexually active?" try "Are you currently sexually active? If so, are you active with men, women or both?" Instead of "What form of birth control do you use?" try "Do you need to use birth control?" This opens the door for all patients to talk about their sexual histories and behaviours.
- Ask non-judgmental, open-ended questions to solicit information about psycho-social stressors and supports. This demonstrates a sensitive and holistic approach to health.
- Be aware that in many provinces, same-sex partners are not considered next-of-kin. Ask every patient to define in writing whom they want involved in their care if necessary. For example, leave a blank line on your patient information form for patients to identify

an emergency contact or to identify a partner if they wish. Encourage lesbian patients with female partners to put their wishes in writing, especially on these two issues: (1) name the partner as the one who can make decisions if the patient becomes mentally incompetent; (2) specify that the partner has full visitation rights in hospitals and care facilities.

- Be aware that lesbians who have lost a lifelong partner or who are living with a partner with a debilitating disease experience pain and problems as would any heterosexual widow or spouse.
- Be aware that families in the lesbian community are often differently constituted than those in traditional, heterosexual society. For example, to many lesbians, friends are family. For lesbian patients in hospital or care facilities, it may be especially important to keep visitor guidelines as flexible as possible.
- Respect the importance of lesbian music and books to some lesbians. Ask lesbians who are ill or dying what their friends can bring that will make the surroundings more familiar and help ease the process.
- Screen for, address and treat patient concerns linked to mental health and substance use. Recognize the impact that societal oppression has on these health issues. Screen for, address and



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continued

## Tip Sheet for Health Care Providers (2)

treat concerns related to abuse and violence, whether domestic, sexual or bias-related.

- Make referrals with sensitivity. If your patient has trusted you and come out as a lesbian, keep this in mind when referring to other practitioners. Try to refer to providers who are sensitive to issues of diversity.
- Find out whether a group in your area (e.g., lesbian/gay group, anti-discrimination course or union organization) offers homophobia education workshops or workshops about providing sensitive care to lesbians, gays and bisexuals, then attend it. If no such workshops exist, ask a lesbian/gay group to offer one to you and your colleagues. (For ideas, see the Resource/Referral list at the back of the *Caring for Lesbian Health* booklet.)
- If you do not have easy access to a group that can offer homophobia education workshops, order the Mautner Project's Tools for Caring about Lesbian Health Kit (1998), which includes an 18-minute training video and a discussion guide for health care providers, as well as other information. Then organize an education/discussion evening for yourself and your colleagues. For ordering information, contact The Mautner Project for Lesbians with Cancer, 1707 L Street NW, Suite 500, Washington DC 20036. Phone: (202) 332-5536 or e-mail: mautner@aol.com.



(Adapted from the *Caring for Lesbian Health* booklet, revised edition, 2001)

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