



Embracing gender diversity

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It was heartening to see a number of events celebrating diversity and the LGBTI community held across the State recently to mark November as Pride month. Yet despite great progress in LGBTI rights and broad public support for LGBTI people, they still face additional challenges in education and at work – healthcare is unfortunately no exception.

Many LGBTI healthcare workers report social exclusion or harassment, with conscious and unconscious biases affecting how they are treated by their colleagues, as well as their patients. Experiences can vary from explicit discrimination to casual comments or jokes made in passing and can lead to people feeling unsafe or undervalued at work, impairing their ability to provide care with integrity and authenticity.

In addition to actual discrimination, many students and junior doctors carry fear regarding the potential ramifications of being open about their sexuality or gender at work, reporting concerns that it may adversely affect their career progression or the opportunities available to them. Some also report worrying that such disclosure will be used to define them, rather than being assessed on their professional and interpersonal skills and talents.

These experiences can be compounded by a relative lack of role models for LGBTI practitioners, particularly in positions of seniority within health services. This does, however, appear to be changing.

During my time as a medical student and junior doctor, I have seen an increase in the number of senior and junior healthcare workers who are open about their sexuality and gender, and I am hopeful that this will help to create a safer working environment for LGBTI staff and students.

There are clear benefits to celebrating and supporting staff diversity. Companies with LGBTI-friendly policies and more diverse workforces perform better on economic metrics and measures of worker satisfaction and are more profitable across a wide variety of industries. Having such policies and strategies in place may be even more important in the healthcare sector, where supporting

LGBTI employees can also help LGBTI patients feel more comfortable seeking healthcare.

We will all face workplace challenges throughout our careers, but the additional stressors faced by LGBTI staff and students can create an unnecessary burden. As employers and the workforce become more accepting and supportive of gender and sexual diversity, there are a number of support systems that medical students and doctors can reach out to.

The working groups and support groups at individual hospitals can connect people with peers in similar situations and provide assistance in difficult situations, while the value of having a good GP cannot be overstated (despite only 30-40 per cent of doctors having their own). There are also crisis support lines available, including Beyond Blue, Lifeline, QLife and headspace.

The Doctors' Health Advisory Service Western Australia (DHASWA) provides a confidential 24/7 advice line staffed by experienced GPs who can provide advice to stressed-out doctors and medical students. Callers do not need to give their name. The DHASWA website also contains many useful resources, including a list of doctors who have an interest in treating doctor patients – some have a special interest in LGBTI. www.dhaswa.com.au

We all have a right to feel safe, accepted and supported at work, and we all have a responsibility to ensure that our colleagues feel comfortable and welcome regardless of their background. Whether visible or not, there are LGBTI members of every area of healthcare provision and supporting diversity in the workplace will ultimately have positive effects for our staff, our hospitals, our healthcare system and our patients. ■

For the purposes of this article, Dr Sebastian Leathersich has used the "LGBTI" abbreviation, acknowledging that it may not represent all genders or sexual orientations.