

Developing a Gender Inclusive Environment in the Health Care System

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Abstract: *The article talks about the importance of gender inclusivity in the healthcare system. There are reports suggesting transgenders were neglected and refused treatment based on their appearance and gender. This is not acceptable and needs to be resolved. I've mentioned a few reforms we could bring to the system to make it gender friendly.*

Keywords: gender neutral, inclusive, reforms, sensitivity, discrimination

What does it mean by gender inclusivity? Gender inclusive means relating to or intended for any gender, in other words it means to be gender neutral. Gender neutral is not referring to either gender but only to people in general.

We often assign the pronouns he/she just by looking at someone's appearance, but it's often not the case and we need to be more aware and sensitive.

It's high time we stop shunning people for coming out or ridicule them for accepting themselves. Parents, peers, family members all of them need to be supportive and encouraging in whatever decision someone makes.

We as a nation have legalised homosexuality in India in 2018, but we have a long way to go. Everyone needs to put in effort to be acquainted about it and evolve out of homophobia. Even if it takes time, we must ensure to always progress.

An important area where gender inclusivity comes into play is the hospital environment, among others. Apart from creating a gender inclusive society we must also focus on the healthcare system subsequently as future doctors. LGBTQIA+ community already face a lot of stigmatisation and it's on us, the doctors, nurses, medical students and everyone who is a part of the healthcare system to ensure that they feel secure, safe and are provided with all the medical facilities without any discrimination. Gender inclusive environment is the need of the hour and a salient feature as a lot of them were denied treatment because of their gender and this is a great concern. Gender inclusivity does not only mean to include the LGBTQIA+ community, it also means to bridge the gap between all genders.

We can carefully devise certain changes to assure the inclusivity of LGBTQIA+ community:

- It's important for every health care facility to publish the programmes and facilities available for the LGBTQIA+ community on their website or somewhere visible in the hospital or on their brochures. Usage of LGBTQIA+ symbols like the pride heart or flag on brochures or on posters in the hospital will make the facility more approachable. Health care centres especially pediatric clinics, fertility centres or gynec clinics can have pictures of families hung up that include pictures of same sex

parents or single parents to show support to the LGBTQIA community.

- It's also important to include gender neutral washrooms in hospitals to avoid confusion and awkwardness to the LGBTQIA+ community.
- Usually when a patient enters the OPD, they are asked to disclose their name, age, address, number and gender is usually assumed looking at the person. So this can be an area of intervention to create a gender friendly health system, the gender of the patient should not be assumed, it should rather be left empty for the patient to fill or the options stating Male / Female / other should be mentioned. We could also include gender pronouns in the forms for patients to fill, this will avoid any confusion in addressing them. The gender should always be asked just like the name, age and other parameters are asked.
- The protocol then is to take the sheet and go to the doctor for a checkup. It's important that only a single patient goes in for a checkup in order to maintain the doctor-patient confidentiality. In smaller hospitals where more than one patient is allowed to enter, privacy of the patient is compromised. Strict measures are to be taken to avoid such situations. Confidentiality regarding the patient's sexual orientation is also important and shouldn't be disclosed to anyone by the doctor.
- During the health check-up, if the doctor examines the patient of the same gender, usually the presence of a nurse or an attendant is not mandatory. But if a male doctor is examining a female patient, the presence of a female nurse or the patient's attendant is necessary, and vice versa is not considered important. But examination of an opposite gender by the doctor must be done in the presence of a same gender nurse as that of the patient. Usually this can pose a challenge as sometimes the hospital might not be manned with enough staff to meet this requirement. In such a case the presence of the patient's attendant should be taken into account. We must always make sure that the patient feels comfortable while undergoing examination. When the patient brings in someone, rather than assuming what the relationship would be between the attendant and the patient, it's important to ask questions like "Whom have you brought along with you today?" Such conversations help the patient feel safe and they gain our trust.

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- Coming to the investigations, the reference range for a few investigations are different for both men and women, it should be noted that both the ranges should be mentioned in everyone's report despite their gender.
- Digitalisation of the laboratory investigations, case sheets, files and other details of the patient will ensure that they are checked only by the doctor, the middle hand of lab technicians and other staff can be bypassed with the help of this tool. This will build a strong faith in the system.
- It is of utmost importance to keep a check on everyone's behaviour and see to it that no one discriminates against a person because of their gender or sexual orientation in the healthcare facility. A complaint form should be accessible to the patients or attendants if they feel they've been subjected to bigotry or refused treatment. Stringent measures should be adopted in order to prevent such unacceptable behaviour.
- When the patient is being prepped for the surgery, or when is advised to rest in the hospital after the surgery, it is essential that the Male and Female wards are kept separate. This is to ensure that the patients and their attendants feel comfortable. Separate wards for the transgenders should be provided to make sure they feel safe and have their sense of privacy, as the Indian population is still not open to the idea of this community. It's a known fact that surgeries and the hospital environment are already very stressful, it's our duty to ensure a pleasant environment regardless of their gender and orientation.
- When same sex couples go to the fertility centres or to the gynaecologist, they should be motivated to opt surrogacy, artificial insemination or other available medical facilities. They should be given maximum information and shouldn't be mistreated. They should be told about adoption facilities as well.
- Not only patients but doctors from the community should be accepted as well without any prejudice. No one should repudiate them on any other basis apart from their qualification.
- If the hospital is linked to a medical college, there is a high chance of students entering the OT for a better understanding of the operation. Prior permission should be taken from the patient. The nurses, interns, Post graduate students assisting the doctors should refrain from clicking pictures of the patient undergoing the surgery as it is not acceptable. It is a violation of the patients privacy, especially when it's a gender transformation surgery.
- Lastly, it is very important for the medical staff including the doctors, nurses, and staff working in the hospital to be sensitised to this topic, they cannot afford to ill treat people or doctors with other genders and make them feel uncomfortable. We need to constantly make an attempt to use gender neutral language and be empathetic towards them. We need to help create a warm and friendly atmosphere in the hospitals to guarantee the prevalence of a gender friendly health system. Hospitals can arrange for training by certain NGOs or other organizations willing to help others broaden their views on this topic. Familiarisation to this topic and keeping an open mind is crucial.

It is not something we learn or inculcate overnight, it happens over a period. We need to be polite when we address them or clarify as to how they would want to be referred to. Bangalore has started its first LGBTQIA+ clinic which is run by and for the same community. Their government also offers wards for transgenders at all government hospitals. Tiny steps like these will pave the way for a greater future filled with scope for improvement and also provides a sense of security that no one will be deprived of basic medical facilities. India is slowly modifying and amending to create a cordial environment for the community. We need to recognise the importance of this and implement certain reforms for a sophisticated and an enhanced health care system.

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