

Transgender health, identity, and dignity

Although some progress has been made, transgender people still face substantial discrimination and threats to their health and wellbeing. Despite a clear need for greater monitoring and understanding of transgender health, current research is both sparse and fragmented.

Poor mental health and psychological distress are disparately high among transgender people. In the USA, where transgender adults represent an estimated 1.4 million individuals, according to the National Center for Transgender Equality, 40% report attempted suicide and depression, 33% anxiety, and 26% alcohol or drug misuse. Preliminary research suggests that gender affirmation might improve mental health through the direct effect of affirmation on wellbeing and through reduced exposure to stressors such as discrimination and violence. In this issue of *The Lancet Public Health*, Ayden Scheim and colleagues provide valuable insights into mental health and access to identification documents (IDs) reflecting gender identity. The study used data from the 2015 US transgender survey, the largest survey of transgender adults, to examine the relationship between having legal identification that affirms a person's lived gender and the prevalence of psychological distress and suicidality. Legal rights to obtain gender-concordant IDs vary greatly from state to state in the USA, but complex administrative procedures and costs can also be barriers. In Scheim and colleagues' study, from more than 22 000 respondents only 11% reported having their preferred name and gender on all of their IDs and 44% on some of their IDs. Among those for whom all of their IDs were gender-concordant, the prevalence of psychological distress was 32% less than that of respondents with no gender-concordant IDs, and they were also 22% less likely to have had suicidal thoughts in the past year. Having only some gender-concordant IDs was also associated with better outcomes than having none, but effect sizes were small. Possessing gender-concordant IDs was found to have no significant association with the prevalence of suicide attempts. Gender affirmation is a key determinant of transgender mental health. For Monica Malta and colleagues, reflecting on this study, "not being able to access gender-congruent IDs also impacts other fundamental rights, such as the right to self-determination, dignity, and freedom, and it impairs

the ability of [transgender] people to travel, access education, seek employment, collect social benefits, and access health care."

Access to health care can indeed be a major issue for transgender people. According to the Center for American Progress, as many as 21% of transgender respondents had been subjected to harsh or abusive language from their health-care provider. In the UK, the charity Stonewall found that gender identity issues impeded access to health care for 40% of transgender people. Recently in Australia, the government has considered a pause in and an inquiry into the provision of health care for transgender adolescents, which prompted the Royal Australian College of Physicians to issue a statement that withholding treatment for transgender youth would be unethical and would improve neither scientific understanding nor patient welfare. In too many countries the situation is grim, with the status of transgender people ranging from being treated with ignorance to outright criminalisation.

Creating systems that allow transgender people to affirm their lived identity is crucial for their health and wellbeing. Having accurate surveys and administrative records of people's lived gender is also important to study and understand health-care needs at the population level. However, obtaining gender-affirming identification and accessing appropriate health care is an issue for transgender people in many countries.

Change is possible. WHO recently decided no longer to recognise so-called "gender identity disorder" as a mental illness in its international classification of diseases. In the USA, 21 states have banned insurers from excluding trans-related health care, 24 states have removed burdensome processes for changing gender on legal IDs, and 14 states offer the "X" designation for non-binary gender identities. The UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity recently urged countries to fully recognise the rights of gender diverse people and create a simple process for obtaining gender-concordant IDs. Gender affirmation is an integral part of transgender people's health and is a question of dignity and human rights. ■ *The Lancet Public Health*

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For the **National Center for Transgender Equality** report see https://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/resources/NTDS_Report.pdf

See **Comment** page e178

See **Articles** page e196

For the **Center for American Progress** see <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbtq-rights/news/2017/05/02/429529/widespread-discrimination-continues-shape-lgbt-peoples-lives-subtle-significant-ways/>

For the **Stonewall** report see <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/lgbt-britain-health>

For the **Australian College of Physicians** letter <https://www.lgbtmap.org/2020-tally-report>

For the **UN expert statement** see <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22906&LangID=E>