

## National Lesbian, Bisexual & Trans Women's Health Week 2018



FAIR ACCESS FOR BETTER HEALTH

12-17 MARCH 2018

#LBTWOMENSHEALTH18



My partner and I have recently been in contact with quite a few healthcare workers who will literally jump to any conclusion about our relationship, other than that we are partners.

I've really clearly told practitioners that we are partners and yet they have still referred to us as "friends"- this is super invalidating of our relationship.

I have once had a nurse ask if we are sisters and when I said no she looked shocked and replied "But you look so alike!" Firstly, my partner and I look absolutely nothing like each other. Secondly, no amount of insisting that we must be sisters because we look so alike will change the fact that we are partners. Just accept it, apologise and move on.

I have had more than one clinician refer to me as my partner's mum when I've been standing right there! This was really shocking and insulting to me, especially as we are around the same age! But it also makes me wonder why people would rather make some clearly very inaccurate assumptions before accepting that we are partners.

My partner is non-binary and uses they/them pronouns. When talking to healthcare services over the phone regarding them, clinicians will often change their pronouns to "he/him" automatically. This hurts on two levels. They've both ignored my partner's gender identity and made assumptions about my sexual orientation.

So please health care services, leave your heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions behind. Accessing certain healthcare services can be stressful enough as it is, and it just adds to the anxiety when we have to constantly justify our relationships and identities.



Models have been used to protect the story-teller's anonymity



In our counselling session for fertility treatment we were asked “what would happen if we had a boy” – if it was worded like this, not had we a gender preference, did we think we would find one gender easier to raise than another, which might be questions perhaps you would ask any would be parents, but it felt like there was a clear message behind this question.

We did have a boy – and when he was 17 months he needed a biopsy – and my partner signed the consent form which stated she had parental responsibility and the hospital refused to accept her signature on the form – we were highly anxious that we did not delay the procedure any longer as he had not eaten for hours so did not make a fuss and I re-signed the form – but it made us put on all his medical notes, in all hospitals where he has treatment, copies of the PR form so we are never in that situation again.

Health visitors would ask us what they should write when we went for his check-ups - as they did not know how to write both mums attended the clinic.

However we have had great A&E experiences when both nurses and Dr's have just asked what are relationship is to our son, and then would say things like “Mums would you like to step this way?”, just automatically accepting the situation and making it easy for our son.



Models have been used to protect the story-teller's anonymity



I'm going to tell you something, and you're going to judge me. I've never been tested for any STIs.

Most of my life I've been in long term relationships, and when I've not been in said relationships, I don't tend to sleep with lots of people. My thinking was that because of these things, the chances of me having anything would be slim to say the least.

I can hear the intakes of breath and the silent shaking of heads. I know, I know.

Anyhow, I realised the blindingly obvious fact that even if you've only been with a few people, you don't know their histories, and it only takes one person, with something, to pass it on to you.

And that's why I decided to get checked out.

Sexual Health Clinics are pretty much like every clinic I've ever been to. Looking around there are a few people, mostly looking fairly anxious, sitting on chairs.

I have to fill in a form, and I'm immediately on guard, because forms and trans people often do not mix well. Luckily, it's relatively friendly, in that it has pronoun boxes, and a box to tick if you choose to identify as trans. It does still assume all male identifying people have penises and all female identifying people have vaginas though, which despite what you may have been told, just isn't true. Gender, as is increasingly being discovered, is more complex than genitals.

I get called by a nurse to come to a room, and it's a man. I ticked a box saying I didn't mind who saw me, but now I feel like I do mind. Suddenly I feel that how he potentially sees me is under threat, as he'll ask what bits I've got, and I feel uncomfortable about telling him, because he's a man, and my experiences of men are nearly always negative.

I don't know what to do, because if I say I'm not comfortable after all its going to be really awkward, and I don't want to seem mean. Also though I've been waiting for an hour now, and I can't stand to wait any longer with all the other people wondering if this was really such a good idea, and the local radio station with its endless adverts for driving schools and zero percent loans.

In the end I do what most people would do, I go along with it. The commercial radio was the clincher if I'm honest.

We go to a room, and I start saying how I'm actually kind of nervous, and that I didn't bring a friend, because I thought it would make for something good to write about if it was just me, but that now I regret that because I didn't think it through, and how that is pretty standard for me.

He smiles and says it's alright, everyone is a little nervous sometimes. He is reassuring and kind, and I feel like I let my preconceptions and past experiences get the better of me. Not for the first time I also think I'm a judgemental jerk.

He does ask me what bits I've got, but he does it in a way that's so matter of fact, yet sensitive, that it's okay.

He then asks me if I'd like to piss in a jar.

I'm very keen on this offer, as I'd been holding it in for about two hours now. He also took some blood, and did a throat swab, because well, you know, oral?

We chat whilst this is all happening, and he tells me about how Syphilis is one of the biggest STIs affecting the area where we live. I have an overwhelming desire to tell him about how everyone thinks Henry VIII had Syphilis, but that actually there's little evidence to prove this. I'm about to blurt it out in a oh my god I'm nervous so I'm going to say anything sort of way when he asks if I'd like a leaflet about it, and I forget all about Henry's STI issues, and instead say it's okay, I don't need one, even though I'm interested in reading about it. I do this because I'm trying to be polite, and don't want to put him out.

He gives me two Syphilis leaflets anyhow. This guy is good.



Models have been used to protect the story-teller's anonymity

He asks me about the last couple of times I'd been with someone, and I tell him about the French woman I slept with once, and the friend I was with for a bit. For some reason I feel the need to go into detail about both these times. I have no idea why, but he seems to be happy to listen, and offer useful commentary on what I tell him.

It strikes me that I really misjudged him, and I did it entirely based on his gender. When people do that to me it really upsets me, and once again I feel like a jerk.

After all the tests are done we start to wrap things up. He tells me they'll ring me if anything shows up, and text if it's all clear. I get up to go, and I want to give him a hug to say how lovely he'd been. In the end he gave me a double hand shake, and I told him he was awesome and that I'd definitely come back for more check-ups if he did them. He laughs, and I realise I'm incapable of playing it cool in anyway whatsoever.

As I leave I think about how today I've learnt something about my own preconceptions, and also about Syphilis.

A week later, as I was sitting in a cafe, my phone buzzed. A text message from the clinic had come through with the all clear. I smile to myself, and think thought as much. Maybe I'll hang onto those leaflets though, just in case.



I identify as Lesbian and have been out since the age of 30 years, I'm now 56 years of age. My experiences within the NHS have generally been good. A previous partner of mine had breast cancer and we were both treated with the utmost respect and consideration. This was in Wakefield. The only thing that was lacking that it would have been very helpful to have been able to talk to other gay women. There was a support group but as we knew it would be heterosexual couples we didn't feel inclined to go. Despite the fact that my then partner had grown up children I was

regarded as next of kin.

The only area that I feel needs real consideration is when I have been for smear tests. It has always been awkward in that they ask you if you have an active sex life and then whether you use contraception and when you say no they don't seem to make the connection that perhaps you could be in a same sex relationship. I don't have a problem with it being on the notes that I'm lesbian I think it would save all the unnecessary questions and any awkwardness. I don't know if there is a move afoot to address this. I've also considered whether some of the female staff may feel awkward about carrying out this procedure.

I have had a few friends that feel their sexual orientation has had bearing on their mental health and that they have been discriminated against. This is really not surprising because myths, misconceptions and prejudices can still be a big issue. I've personally been very fortunate in having a supportive family and group of friends.



Models have been used to protect the story-teller's anonymity





At 16, maybe 17, I went out with college friends to a night out, my first proper night to a club. Throughout the course of the night it would appear that I was spiked as my memories are almost non-existent and I have only been able to piece together the night from what other people told me.

I got asked to leave the club, my friend was told he couldn't wait with me and I was left on my own to navigate my own way home. In that time I rang my Dad who heard me in a taxi with a number of males (none of whom I know) and they were trying to take me back to theirs in a taxi and I was trying to say I wanted to go home. I then apparently put the phone down and my Dad couldn't contact me anymore.

The next thing I knew I had woken up in my bed, almost fully clothed with only a vague memory of a taxi dropping me at home and but not know if I had paid for it or at what time. I spoke to my mum about it and the Dad told me about the phone call.

As I had no recollection of anything, my mum took me to the local sexual health service for a screening (not knowing at the time that it was too soon to identify some infections, but I at least got emergency contraception).

The sexual health nurse asked me lots of questions which I couldn't answer, as well as about the last time I'd had sex. I was an out lesbian and told her this and she became what seemed slightly less convinced by my concerns of the night before - I was extremely worried I had been raped - and started asking me if I would know what it felt like if a man had had sex with me. She wrapped up the session by asking me: if I wasn't a lesbian, would I still have the same concerns, or is it because I'm lesbian I was assuming these men had raped me?

I left feeling extremely unsupported and like I was making a fuss of this because of my identity as a lesbian and that a straight woman may not have had the same concerns. This was 10yrs ago now so I would like to think that this practice has completely changed, but that experience has stuck with me and I have never used a sexual health service since.



Models have been used to protect the story-teller's anonymity