

The Lesbian Health Agenda

BEN N. QUAN

We've heard the phrase "it's a man's world." And by reviewing history, we have seen this phrase take action. Many post "baby boomers" may not remember a time when women could not vote, serve in the military or have careers outside of the home. Though equality between the genders has improved, there is much more work that needs to be done. Some of that work should be done in the LGBT community. Though gay community visibility improved, much of that visibility has focused primarily on gay men, especially in the topic of health. It's no surprise, since "it's a man's world," that groups like the West Hollywood Lesbian Visibility Committee are working every day to ensure that the lesbian community's important concerns are heard and handled appropriately.

The WeHo LVC was established in 1989 to bring awareness to the lesbian community in Los Angeles, and to act as a resource for women in need. At the forefront of the organization's mission is the Lesbian Health Agenda (LHA). The LHA was developed in response to the invisibility of lesbians and lesbian health issues within the health-care system. The ultimate goal of the LHA is to become a hub of information and resources for lesbian health issues, both for individuals as well as to inform the medical community and legislature.

The invisibility of lesbian health issues in the health-care system can create a number of challenges and barriers. A "lesbian medical closet" is one of those common barriers faced by both the patient and her medical provider. Lesbians are likely to "stay in the closet" while visiting their doctors. Some doctors may alienate their lesbian patients through a common assumption that all women have sex with men. A question like "Are you on the

pill or any other type of contraception?" implies that women who have sex with men are the norm. A lesbian patient may want to avoid judgment or hostility from their doctor by not revealing her sexuality, which ultimately results in her not being completely honest about all her health concerns. Some lesbians may avoid seeking health care entirely.

One health concern for all women (regardless of sexual orientation) is cervical cancer. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that 6.2 million new cases of HPV (human papilloma virus) occur in the U.S. each year, and about 50 percent of all sexually active people will get HPV at some point in their lives. HPV is a common virus that can lead to genital warts or cervical cancer. And since the cervix is a part of the body that a female cannot easily see or feel, an annual pelvic exam (pap smear) with a doctor is crucial.

According to the WeHo LVC, lesbians are significantly less likely than heterosexual and bisexual women to obtain a pap smear. Distrust of the medical profession and the lack of physician recommendation for this exam contribute to lesbians overlooking or ignoring it. There is also a common shared myth that lesbians are not at risk for cervical cancer, when in fact the opposite is true. Lesbians display more risk factors for cervical cancer than heterosexual women.

Cervical health is just one area of women's health. Visibility about breast health, mental health, relationship health and other concerns of sexual health (STIs

including HIV) is in great need in the lesbian community. Unfortunately many lesbians have not been lucky enough to have medical providers that are open to homosexuals. Some doctors may not be as accommodating as others to the needs of lesbians. Some female doctors feel uncomfortable examining a lesbian patient and may exhibit behavioral signs of their discomfort. The WeHo LVC recognizes that these are many of the concerns lesbians face when they access health care.

Acceptance is the solution that can be made to increase visibility in the lesbian community.

T h r o u g h acceptance, health concerns for lesbians also start to gain visibility. Acceptance includes equal insurance coverage for domestic partners, the same coverage enjoyed by married couples; medical professionals acknowledging that they do have lesbian patients who deserve respectful and competent health care; and acceptance within the lesbian community that ultimately everyone is responsible for her own health and everyone must fight for equitable treatment as an underserved population.

Friday, June 6, kicks off the annual West Hollywood Gay Pride weekend. The WeHo LVC will also be honoring state sen. Sheila Kuehl with the 2008 Etheridge Award named after singer/songwriter Melissa Etheridge. Established in 2007, the Etheridge Award is given to a lesbian who exemplifies the utmost character and determination in today's society.

For more information on the WeHo LVC, log on to www.weholvc.org. ▼



**Lesbian Visibility Committee
of the City of West Hollywood**