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## Peer Review/Ethics: How Can Our Office Be More Inclusive of Transgender Patients?

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# How Can Our Office Be More Inclusive of Transgender Patients?

By Debra Peters, DDS

**Question:** I want to enhance my dental team's understanding of being more inclusive of the transgender patients we treat in our office. What suggestions do you have to assist with this process?

**Answer:** Many transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) people experience stigma and discrimination in their daily lives. Because of this, TGNC individuals may have limited access to dental and health care, further increasing the disparities in dental health equity.

In January 2020, the *Journal of the American Dental Association* published an article, "Understanding the Transgender Patient," which provided guidance based

on the ADA *Code of Ethics*. To better understand how to apply this guidance, I interviewed Dr. Rebecca Klott, psychologist and president of River City Psychological Services of Grand Rapids. She and her team provide care to the LGBTQ community. She also has personal insight as a parent of a transgender son who will soon be leaving for college.

As Dr. Klott explains, unlike other members of the LGBTQ community, transgender people usually must tell their health providers of their gender or non-binary identification. She stresses that this can be very difficult for families or individuals. First impressions and how this information is conveyed and received are vitally important.

Since this conversation usually takes place on the phone or at the front desk upon arrival, providing training and appropriate resources for dental teams may assist in an overall good experience for everyone. Information from the National LGBT Health Education Center on forms and policy is available at [lgbtqiahealtheducation.org](http://lgbtqiahealtheducation.org) to detail areas to evaluate for your registration and insurance forms.

Because some TGNC persons change their name, you should ensure that your forms for all patients provide an opportunity to list "affirmed name" and "affirmed gender." It's common to see blanks for "preferred name." According to the glossary of terminology at [PFLAG.org](http://PFLAG.org), "affirmed gender" represents an individual's true gender, rather than their gender assigned at birth (see box). Additionally, it is essential to make sure that all persons in the office address the patient appropriately.

Difficulties may arise when filing an insurance claim. Available instructions for completing the ADA Dental Claim Form and the HIPAA standard electronic dental claim transaction (X12 837D v5010) do not have special instructions concerning completion for transgender patients. The subscriber and patient name should be the same as recorded in the payer's files to facilitate claims adjudication. Patients may consider resolving discrepancies directly with their carrier. Dental offices may

## See these Additional Resources

"Understanding the Transgender Patient," *Journal of the American Dental Association*, January 2020 issue. At: [https://jada.ada.org/article/S0002-8177\(19\)30795-0/fulltext](https://jada.ada.org/article/S0002-8177(19)30795-0/fulltext).

"Affirmative Services for Transgender and Gender Diverse People — Best Practices for Frontline Health Care Staff." National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center. At: <https://www.lgbtqiahealtheducation.org/publication/affirmative-services-for-transgender-and-gender-diverse-people-best-practices-for-frontline-health-care-staff/>.

PFLAG National Glossary of Terms  
[Pflag.org/glossary](http://Pflag.org/glossary)

seek modifications to forms or dental software to record the legal name if necessary. Check with your software vendor to ensure appropriate data input for your dental claim.

An additional resource, "Affirmative Services for Transgender and Gender Diverse People – Best Practices for Frontline Health Care Staff," can be found at the National LGBTQ-IA+ Health Education Center (see box, Page 28.). It explains the complex nature of changing a name and suggests language to resolve insurance claim errors compassionately.

Gender identity is not always apparent by someone's name, how they look, or how they speak. Getting into the habit of inquiring about a patient's preferred pronouns is one way to make a patient feel more comfortable. If unsure, it's best to use their name and avoid pronouns altogether.

Another point that Dr. Klott emphasizes is never to objectify the person. Don't ask about surgeries that aren't relevant to your health questionnaire. It is not appropriate to ask if the question is posed out of personal curiosity. This may seem obvious, but she stressed that such questions do frequently occur. Instead, when evaluating your health information, consider the following questions of yourself, "What do I

know? What do I need to know? How can I ask sensitively?" You have a male-appearing patient, but notice they are on estrogen-progesterone. Dr. Klott suggests a simple statement such as, "I see that you are on these medications. Is there anything that you want me to know?" If they don't answer, she suggests moving forward without further pushing the issue.

Mistakes will occur. Someone will use the wrong pronoun or get a name wrong. Keep it simple. Apologize to the patient, using language such as "I didn't mean to show disrespect by using the wrong name. I apologize." As Dr. Klott further notes, the dental team member may be uncomfortable for a minute, but the patient or parent will be uncomfortable many more times and much longer. Show compassion and understanding.

Lastly, teams that work together to create an environment of respect enhance the care for all patients. With the ADA Code as our North Star, we must also take the time to consider all aspects of dental care and how our actions, words, and beliefs can work positively to provide a welcoming environment for members of the TGNC community. ●

### About the Author

**Debra Peters, DDS**, of Grand Rapids, is a member of the American Dental Association Council on Ethics, Bylaws, and Judicial Affairs. She served as MDA president during the 2018-19 administrative year, and served as speaker of the MDA House of Delegates from 2008-2017, among other posts in organized dentistry.



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