Queer Issues in Healthcare

PRISM
New England College of Optometry

Edited by: Benjamin Young, OD, FAAO

Banned Corneas

By: Brian Bouchard



Did you know the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) currently bans gay men from donating their corneas? When reliable HIV tests were not yet available in 1994, the administration created a policy prohibiting cornea donations from all men who had sex with another a man (MSM) within 5 years.

A study conducted by Michael Puente, MD in 2020 found that 1,600 - 3,200 cornea donations each year are turned away due to this policy. The study also found that there were no known cases of HIV transmission through corneal transplants, which is unsurprising given that the cornea is avascular and has no blood supply.

Not only does this outdated policy unjustly target and marginalize the queer community, it also impacts the estimated 12.7 million people worldwide in need of donated corneas. Recently, the FDA stated that they will revise their donor criteria for sexual activity, but they have not released a time frame for when this will occur. We hope policy changes will be based on current research rather than on assumption, bias, or fear.

For more information, please visit LegalizeGayEyes.org to read Dr. Puente's study and to learn how you can help.

Puente MA, Patnaik JL, Lynch AM, et al. Association of Federal Regulations in the United States and Canada With Potential Corneal Donation by Men Who Have Sex With Men. JAMA Ophthalmol. 2020;138(11):1143–1149. doi:10.1001/jamaophthalmol.2020.3630

Don’t Reject My Homoglobin!

By: Kirstyn Horsley



The American Red Cross has longstanding eligibility requirements for all blood donations. General requirements include being at least 17 years old, at least 110 pounds, and feeling well at the time of donation. Men who have sex with men (MSM) used to have a lifetime ban on donating blood until 2015, when this limitation was reduced to 1 year of abstinence. In 2020, the policy was updated again to reduce the requisite abstinence to 3 months. This same requirement does not apply to women who have sex with women. Thankfully, the Red Cross is now working with the FDA on a health questionnaire that may replace the 3-month eligibility rule.

Charting Documentation

By: Jesse Spina



In recent years there have been many improvements to charting patients’ sexual orientation and gender identity (SO/GI). In March 2016, a federal policy started requiring medical institutions to report SO/GI statistics to better understand the populations served, promote “culturally competent care delivery,” and reduce “health disparities overall” (National LGBT Health Education Center). This data requirement further enhanced a 2015 EHR incentive known as the Meaningful Use program. The program allows users to record and change SO/GI data as needed, providing flexibility for patients whose SO/GI may fluctuate (LGBT Health). These advancements have led to more accepting and efficient health care providers.

To collect SO/GI data, a comprehensive registration form should be given to all new patients and include demographic information such as race, sex, date of birth, and pronouns. Patients may also be asked to include their preferred name to ensure a smooth office visit; to eliminate billing issues, it is also important to collect the name that appears on insurance and legal documents. By collecting patient data and addressing them with their correct name and pronouns, patients will feel comfortable returning to their healthcare providers to receive culturally responsive, patient-centered care.

National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center. Ready, Set, Go! Guidelines and Tips For Collecting Patient Data on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI). 5 May, 2022.

“High Risk Homosexual Behavior”

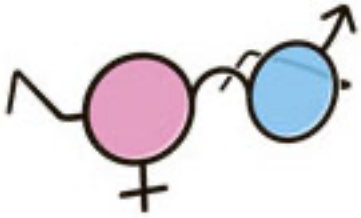
By: Parker Ayer

Statistically, the queer community is more at risk for HIV than their cisgender/hetero counterparts. Truvada for Pre Exposure Prophylaxis, or “PrEP”, is a pill that can be taken once daily to significantly lower the risk of HIV infection. Rules under the Affordable Care Act required that insurance companies completely cover the cost of PrEP and subsequent follow-ups by 2021. To be eligible for free care, individuals may have to say that they engage in “high risk sexual behavior,” a diagnostic qualifier both vague and stigmatizing.



Similar issues were encountered during the Monkey Pox outbreak of 2022 which primarily affected MSM. Recipients had to pass a screening to receive the vaccine, including questions about frequency of sexual encounters and number of sexual partners. While past behavioral patterns may help estimate risk and need for prophylactic care, any future sexual encounter can put an individual at risk. Within the queer community, there are many sexual lifestyles, but preventative sexual healthcare should be readily available for everyone without stigma.

Gendered Glasses?



By: Dr. Benjamin Young, OD, FAAO

If you have been to an optical recently on the hunt for a new pair of glasses, you may have thought to yourself, “Where is the men’s section” or “Where are the women’s glasses?” This is completely natural, as we tend to be driven towards purchasing products that align with our gender identity and help us to express to the world how we see ourselves. As optometrists, we may be tempted to offer our own interpretations of what constitutes masculine or feminine and partition out areas according to gender. However, consider that your definition of gender expression may be completely different than someone else’s, and we should allow our patients to choose for themselves how to interpret what makes a frame masculine or feminine. Instead, organizing your frames according to style or brand gives your patients the freedom to comfortably explore the entire optical and pick the frames that works best for themselves, without having to fit within a box you made for them.