

Tip Sheet for Healthcare Providers: Providing Inclusive, Affirming and Safer Perinatal Care to 2SLGBTQIA+ Individuals

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The perinatal period uniquely impacts the mental health and wellbeing of 2SLGBTQIA+ people. Previous or anticipated experiences of discrimination and invisibility, in addition to systems-level inequities, can affect trust in perinatal healthcare providers (HCPs) and the broader healthcare system. These barriers can also impact equitable access to timely, quality healthcare, thereby contributing to poor physical and mental health outcomes and traumatic experiences. This educational resource offers practical tips to support HCPs in providing inclusive, affirming and culturally safer care to 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals during pregnancy, birth and postpartum.

Action is imperative at the provider level and must also take place at the organizational and health system levels to achieve sustainable change. PCMCH is committed to advancing health equity for 2SLGBTQIA+ communities through continued learning, engagement and partnerships to deepen our understanding of the healthcare needs and experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ people and take meaningful action.

2SLGBTQIA+ is an acronym that stands for Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/trans, queer or questioning, intersex and asexual. The '+' is meant to be inclusive of additional sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions (including but not limited to non-binary and pansexual). Two-Spirit (2S) is a term used by some Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity, carrying various definitions and meanings for different individuals and communities. Indigenous conceptualizations of diverse gender identities, roles and sexual orientations have existed since time immemorial, yet the term Two-Spirit was coined by Elder Myra Laramee in 1990.

Did You Know?

The Ontario Human Rights Code prohibits discrimination and harassment because of sexual orientation, gender expression or gender identity. Discipline-specific regulatory bodies have codes of conduct and ethics in place regarding non-discrimination.

1. Ask About Identity

- Introduce yourself and your pronouns, and ask all people about their pronouns (e.g., he, she, they, etc.) to avoid making assumptions based on how they look or present
- Be cognizant that sexual orientation and gender identity are fluid and may change over time
- Use gender-inclusive language when addressing all people that are new to you (e.g., parent rather than mother/father)
- Ask what name someone goes by rather than assuming that a birth name or the legal name written on medical documents is correct

- Ask about gender identity, sexual orientation, sexual activity and kinship only if relevant
- Ask about chosen family and support(s) to recognize that family configurations are diverse and to avoid perpetuating heteronormative assumptions about kinship

Some Examples:

- “My name is ... and my pronouns are ____ / ____ . How would you like to be addressed?”
- “What do I need to know about your identity or your body that would allow me to provide you the best care?”
- “How would you like me to address you and/or your partner(s)?”
- “How would you like me to refer to your reproductive parts during care?”

2. Learn, Listen and Be Respectful

- Strive to be consistent in using the correct name and pronouns at all times
- Respect that one may choose to not disclose some or all aspects of their identity
- Treat all people, including 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, with respect and dignity
- Be aware of and seek to understand the intersecting identities of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals
- Reflect on the social determinants of health and consider that 2SLGBTQIA+ people experience socio-economic, mental health and physical health disparities that may make accessing perinatal healthcare difficult and/or contribute to perinatal health disparities

Did You Know?

A Two-Spirit Indigenous person may or may not identify as LGBTQIA+ and an Indigenous LGBTQIA+ person may or may not identify as Two-Spirit.

3. Build and Maintain Trust

- Apologize briefly when you make a mistake and move on; rather than focusing on your intent, prioritize the impact (e.g., if you misgender someone, correct yourself, apologize and carry on)
- Seek to establish a safe and positive care experience from the first point of contact
- Review forms for inclusivity related to gender identity, sexual orientation and relationships; raise opportunities for improvement with the authors of any given form
- Promote continuity of care among the perinatal healthcare team to avoid 2SLGBTQIA+ people having to constantly educate providers about their identities and needs
- Ask questions about a person’s body or medical history only if relevant to clinical care

- Exercise privacy during care and plan for how confidentiality will be maintained
- Make efforts to create an inclusive and welcoming environment (e.g., gender-inclusive signage, diverse family images and visible non-discrimination policy)

Some Examples:

- “How would you feel if I shared this information with other members of the care team?”
- “Have you had this exam before? What can I do to make it as comfortable as possible?”
- On an intake form (if the individual is comfortable disclosing):
 - “What is your gender identity?” _____
 - “What is your sexual orientation?” _____

Rainbow Health Ontario (RHO) has positive space posters available for download in both English and French.

Did You Know?

Mental health concerns should not be assumed to be related to one’s gender identity and/ or sexual orientation. During the perinatal period, ask about mental health and wellbeing and use validated screening tools. The Edinburgh Perinatal/Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) uses gender neutral language and is available in multiple languages. PCMCH’s Care Pathway for the Management of Perinatal Mental Health provides a recommended approach for the identification, assessment and monitoring of mental health issues for pregnant and postpartum people.

4. Adopt a Trauma-informed Approach

- Learn about and apply the principles of a trauma-informed approach to avoid further traumatizing 2SLGBTQIA+ people in the course of accessing perinatal care
- Discuss physical exams in advance, describe each step before and as it is being performed, allowing opportunities to pause as needed
- Obtain ongoing consent while moving through an assessment or procedure
- Strive to refer individuals to inclusive and culturally safe providers and services (e.g., RHO has a directory of 2SLGBTQIA+ friendly health and social service providers)
- Learn about gender dysphoria and the potential impacts on mental health and wellbeing
- Collaborate on plans for infant feeding, rather than making any assumptions about lactation, breastfeeding or chestfeeding

Principles of a Trauma-informed Approach to Care

- Patient empowerment
- Choice

- Collaboration
- Safety
- Trustworthiness

Learn more from the Center for Health Care Strategies about key ingredients for creating a trauma-informed approach to care clinically and organizationally

Did You Know?

Discrimination and stigmatization on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation that individuals experience can be internalized and contribute to minority stress. The intersections of being 2SLGBTQIA+ with other elements of identity (e.g., race, disability, etc.) can exacerbate minority stress and contribute to poor health outcomes.

5. Practice Allyship

- Foster an environment of accountability by speaking up against discrimination
- Recognize that it is not the responsibility of 2SLGBTQIA+ people (patients and/or colleagues) to educate individual HCPs or the healthcare team
- Reflect on your own biases and how they might contribute to health/healthcare disparities
- Advocate for research to further understanding and awareness of 2SLGBTQIA+ perinatal mental health needs and perinatal healthcare experiences
- Share opportunities for continuing education and training with colleagues
- Consult with and compensate people with lived experience on any initiatives
- Celebrate 2SLGBTQIA+ awareness dates (e.g., Trans Awareness Week in November and Pride Month in June)

Language is constantly evolving. The language used in this tip sheet is representative of the time in which it was developed and based on consensus among those who were consulted. Despite PCMCH's best efforts to strive for inclusivity, we respectfully acknowledge that the language used in this tip sheet may not be reflective of all perspectives about what is most appropriate. The 2SLGBTQIA+ acronym was chosen for this tip sheet to capture the breadth of sexual and gender diversity among people and communities in Ontario and Canada.

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Continuing Education Opportunities

In addition to the references, opportunities for perinatal HCPs to continue their learning beyond this resource are listed below:

Written Materials

Creating Authentic Spaces Info Sheets: Gender-Specific and Gender Neutral Pronouns Infographic (2017) is a resource developed by The 519.

Practical tips to make your electronic health records more inclusive of 2SLGBTQ people (2023) is a resource created by Rainbow Health Ontario with guidance on incorporating sexual orientation and gender identity into intake forms and EHRs.

Focus on Forms and Policy: Creating an Inclusive Environment for LGBT Patients (2017) is a publication by the National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Centre at Fenway Institute.

LGBTQ2S Glossary of Terms by the 519 (2020) is a list of definitions that aim to aid in the facilitation of shared understandings around equity, diversity, inclusion, and awareness.

LGBTQ2S Inclusion Playbook: A Series of Best Practices for Healthcare Environments (2020) by the 519 and a collection of primary healthcare and community healthcare providers in East Toronto. The Playbook is intended to support people working in acute, primary, and community health and social service environments in fostering inclusive spaces for LGBTQ2S communities and people.

Health Equity Impact Assessment: LGBT2SQ Populations Supplement (2020) by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, Rainbow Health Ontario/Sherbourne Health. This is a useful companion to the Health Equity Impact Assessment Tool (HEIA).

Health in Focus: Racialized 2SLGBTQ Health (2022) is a publication by Rainbow Health Ontario/Sherbourne Health that is an evidence review and practical guide designed for healthcare providers and researchers.

Promoting 2SLGBTQI+ Health Equity (2021) is a Best Practice Guideline by the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario, which provides evidence-based recommendations on foundational, inclusive and affirming care practices.

Re:searching for LGBTQ2S+ Health is a team of LGBTQ2S+ and ally researchers who focus on understanding how LGBTQ2S+ people experience physical and emotional health, and how they access health services. The team is situated out of the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto.

Ten Strategies for Creating Inclusive Health Care Environments for LGBTQIA+ People (2021) is a publication by the National LGBTQI+ Health Education Centre at the Fenway Institute.

Tips on how to practice 2SLGBTQI Allyship is an online resource by Egale Canada.

Trauma- & Violence-Informed Care (TVIC): A Tool for Health & Social Service Organizations & Providers (2021) is an online resource by EQUIP Health Care.

Multimedia Materials

The Association of Ontario Midwives (AOM) has a resource page, including recordings of webinars to support midwives caring for trans, genderqueer, intersex and other people from the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

Two Spirits, One Voice is an Egale initiative that seeks to bolster support for persons that identify both as LGBTQI and Indigenous – Two Spirit people. The video, funded through both the Tegan and Sara Foundation and Laidlaw Foundation, attempts to educate the general public on the history and barriers that impact Two Spirit people in Canada.

Queer Care Kit is a project developed to translate academic research to the public on the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ2S+ communities to empower LGBTQ2S+ people with knowledge about their communities and increase capacity for LGBTQ2S+ informed health and mental health care among practitioners within Canada.

Online Courses and Training

2SLGBTQ Foundations Course is always available from Rainbow Health Ontario, a program of Sherbourne Health. This is a seven-module self-directed course on 2SLGBTQ health for healthcare and social service providers.

Foundations of Indigenous Cultural Safety (ICS) is a course offered by the Indigenous Primary Health Care Council (IPHCC), created for individuals working in the health care system to learn the importance of adopting culturally safe and appropriate practices when serving Indigenous clients and patients.

Gender-Affirming Perinatal Care: Safe, Respectful, and Celebratory is a self-paced e-learning course through Continuing Professional Development, Faculty of Medicine at the University of British Columbia.

Indigenous Cultural Safety and Anti-Racism Program and Two Spirit Education is offered online or in-person by Bear Waters Gathering.

San'yas Anti-Racism Indigenous Cultural Safety Training Program is an online training course offered by the Indigenous Health department at the Provincial Health Services Authority in Vancouver, BC. There are Ontario-specific courses.

The 519 is a City of Toronto agency that provides organizations with insights, tools, and understanding to create environments that are 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive, respectful and welcoming through education and training.

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Contact PCMCH at info@pcmch.on.ca