

LGBTQ+ Equality: What Dentists Need to Know

by Alex Barrera, DDS and Cynthia Corral, DDS



Barrera



Corral

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the past few years, the Greater Houston Dental Society's Diversity & Inclusion Committee has highlighted various topics in the hopes of raising awareness and increasing the cultural competency of our member dentists. Past topics have dived into discussions of race, ethnicity, and gender, but one population still remains overlooked. In this article, you will learn about a group that has, in the past, been excluded in discussions of healthcare due to the discrimination and stigma often placed on these individuals.

BACKGROUND

LGBTQ+ is an umbrella term that is used to describe people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, or other gender/sexual minorities. They are diverse, come from all walks of life, and include people of all races and ethnicities, all ages, all socioeconomic statuses, and from all parts of the country. While there are many forms of sexual/gender minorities, below we will list the most common as well as define terms commonly used when discussing these groups.¹

LGBTQ+ HEALTH DISPARITIES

The National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities has identified the LGBTQ community as a "health disparity population," due primarily to lowered access to health care. Unfortunately, some of this comes down to LGBTQ+ patients avoiding medical treatment due to past discrimination and fear of stigma. When LGBTQ people belong to other marginalized groups, such as being a person of color or having a disability, it becomes more and more difficult to find accessible, non-biased care.

Despite recent progress in health equity, LGBTQ+ people continue to experience worse health outcomes than their heterosexual counterparts. Research shows this is due to factors including low rates of healthcare coverage, high rates of stress due to systematic discrimination, and a lack of cultural competency in the health care system.⁴

HOUSTON EQUALITY DENTAL NETWORK

Witnessing discrimination and disparities amongst the queer community inspired the creation of the Houston Equality Dental Network (HEDN), an organized group specifically for LGBTQ+ dental students, professionals, and patients.

Term	Definition
Sexual Orientation	An emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people.
Gender Identity	One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither; how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves.
Gender Expression	Physical external appearance of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, haircut or voice; characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine.
Sex	The physical traits you are born with that we think of as sex characteristic; the sex you are assigned at birth.
Gay	Usually refers to men who are attracted to men. Also can be used for women who are attracted to women.
Lesbian	Women who are attracted to women.
Bisexual	A person who is attracted to both men and women.
Transgender	A term for individuals whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from those associated with their assigned sex at birth. The term transgender does not provide information about a person's sexual orientation.
Cisgender	People whom are not transgender or gender-variant. A term to describe those whose gender identities and expressions are aligned with the cultural norms of the sex they were assigned at birth.
Intersex	A term for people who are born with physical sex attributes or chromosome patterns that are not easily classified with typical definitions of male or female.
Non-binary	A person is someone who does not identify as exclusively a man or a woman. Someone who is non-binary might feel like a mix of genders, or like they have no gender at all.
Queer	Used either as an umbrella term for anyone identifying as not exclusively heterosexual, or for those who find the other terms too limiting or fraught with culture connotations.



HOUSTON EQUALITY
DENTAL NETWORK

The purpose of our organization is to advance equality for queer dental professionals in their work and learning environments, while fostering awareness and research in oral health disparities in this population, and creating a safe space for LGBTQ+ individuals in the dental profession. Some of our objectives are to raise awareness and advocacy, host LGBTQ+-focused continuing education courses, increase access to care, raise money for student scholarships, and work with dental schools to ensure they include LGBTQ-related education in their curriculum.

“As President, it is my charge to decrease the mistreatment of LGBTQ+ individuals while addressing the quality of treatment delivered, embolden dentists to engage confidently with LGBTQ+ patients, and move history forward with long-lasting systemic changes in the practice of dentistry,” states Dr. Cynthia Corral.

OUR STORIES

“My biggest hesitation before starting dental school was whether or not I would be out of the closet. I was deeply terrified that my sexuality would affect my success in my education because of the conservative history of our profession. To an extent, I feel like I was not able to perform my best while a student and avoided countless social events, leadership opportunities, and getting to know my professors due to the constant anxiety of being an LGBTQ+ individual. Through HEDN, I want to change that. I want every dental student to be in an environment free from fear of discrimination so that they are able to thrive and shine to their full potential.” - **Dr. Alex Barrera**

“My first and extremely impressionable experience with discrimination was in 7th grade, and continued through 9th grade in the form of derogatory comments and disgusted glares. As a result, I adopted a feminine appearance to avoid being judged and to blend in with others. I continued a life in the closet throughout my entire academic career and into early adulthood. However, that all changed 6 years ago when I decided to be my own advocate and chose to be my authentic self. The person you see today is someone who, at one time, methodically and purposely costumed herself to fit in, but is now living a much more fulfilled life. I have witnessed the catalytic effect of the power of authenticity throughout the LGBTQ+ community, and the success that comes from individuals just like myself living their truth.” - **Dr. Cynthia Corral**

“I grew up at a time when being gay was something to be ashamed of but I am very fortunate to have seen the stigma of being gay slowly evolve into general acceptance. Moving to Houston made it easy for me to forge the identity that made me the person that I am today. I made a decision to wear my gayness like a badge of honor and in the process, I created a safe environment in my office for the LGBTQ community.” - **Dr. Marcus De Guzman**

This article is part of a two-part series on the topics of LGBTQ+ discussions. Resources on LGBTQ+ health issues can be found at www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth. To learn more about HEDN, please visit www.houstonequalitydental.org.

REFERENCES

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5478215/pdf/cu-reus-0009-00000001184.pdf>
2. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions>
3. <http://religiousinstitute.org/resources/sexuality-gender-definitions/>
4. <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/nih-recognizes-lgbtq-community-health-disparity-population-n661161>

Access to health care and health insurance

■ Heterosexual ■ LGB ■ Transgender

Health Disparity #1: Heterosexual adults are more likely to have health insurance coverage.⁵

% of adults with health insurance



Health Disparity #2: LGB adults are more likely to delay or not seek medical care.⁶

% of adults delaying or not seeking health care



Health Disparity #3: LGB adults are more likely to delay or not get needed prescription medicine.⁷

% of adults delaying or not getting prescriptions



Health Disparity #4: LGB adults are more likely to receive health care services in emergency rooms.⁸

% of adults receiving ER care



Board members of the Houston Equality Dental Network. From L to R: Dr. Austin Faulk, Dr. Alex Barrera, Dr. Daniella Farias, Dr. Cynthia Corral, Dr. Aaron Menchaca, Dr. Marcus De Guzman