

How to Choose a Care Provider: A Guide for Lesbians on How to Choose Doctors and Counselors

(by Donna Huen and Jeremy Buchner, adapted for Quebec and the LMA by Mona Greenbaum)

Some people choose a family doctor while others like to see a regular physician at a walk-in clinic. Others see different care providers according to their needs at the time. It is often a good idea both for ourselves and our children to develop an ongoing relationship with one primary care provider who knows your medical and family history. The following information about how to choose a primary care provider was gleaned from an interesting booklet called "How to Choose a Care Provider." It can be obtained by phoning the Winnipeg Gay/ Lesbian Resource Centre (204)474-0212.

If you are seeking a primary care provider you have the right to interview potential providers. If you are comfortable with disclosing, you could tell the doctor "I am a lesbian. If that's going to be a problem for you I would like to know now so as not to waste each other's time." There are good reasons to be open with your care provider, in order to receive the best possible medical care available.

Here is a checklist of items to consider when you are shopping for a care provider. Once you've got a list of potential doctors, phone and check if they are seeing new patients. When you make an appointment clearly tell them that you are coming to interview the doctor to select an ongoing primary care provider.

- * Try to get a good recommendation from a friend
- * Look for language that doesn't assume heterosexuality, a good reputation with the gay and lesbian community and knowledge and sensitivity about sexual, gender, ethnic as well as alternative family diversity
- * check your comfort level: Is the care provider friendly? Do they treat you as an equal? Was the physical exam respectful? Do you feel you belong there? Are there posters or other signs of appreciation of sexual diversity? Has the care provider researched gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, HIV/AIDS health? Do they understand how it is different? Do they have knowledge and experience dealing with issues of importance such as self esteem, risk behaviors, gay bashing, homophobia, sexual abuse, sexually transmitted infections, addictions?

Look for a medical provider who:

- * has a practice in the neighborhood if possible
- * is in good standing with their professional association (check with the Collège des médecins: (514) 933-4441)
- * has good hours of availability
- * is careful of your privacy and confidentiality (if you are worried about this you can ask them to tell you how they will record sensitive information in your chart and who else will have access to your chart).

- * takes the time to listen to your concerns and answer your questions, or will find out if they do not know the answers
- * values and welcomes your involvement in your health care (should not be offended if you ask questions)
- * doesn't inappropriately use gender specific language when taking your sexual history.
- * offers treatment options, is open to other types of health treatments and recognizes your right to use alternative health treatments
- * is knowledgeable and can refer you to other care providers and specialists
- * promotes healthy sexuality
- * provides continuity of care
- * will allow your partner or friend to come with you to appointments
- * recognizes both biological and non-biological parents
- * has hospital admitting privileges

The values and philosophies of the care provider may be important to you. For example, you may want to see a care provider who promotes preventative medicine, a healthy lifestyle, and personal responsibility for health. You may wish to see a care provider who practices in a multidisciplinary environment- someone who considers mental and emotional needs as well as physical- and/ or someone who is on salary (e.g. working in a CLSC) as opposed to fee-for-service (as in private practice). If such values are important to you, you should discuss these at your first meeting.

Evaluating the Medical Appointment

Think about these questions:

- * Did you feel you were given enough time? An average doctor's visit is 15 minutes, with 30 minutes for a complete physical or periodic health exam.
- * Were you able to see the doctor at the time of your appointment?
- * Did you feel you could ask the questions you needed to ask?
- * When you asked the question, did the doctor answer in a way you could understand?
- * Did you feel the care provider was willing to work together with you in your health care?
- * Did you talk about important life experiences or circumstances that might be linked to your symptoms now? Did you explain how your condition affects your life or work?
- * Did the doctor offer different choices about treatment?
- * Did you feel the physical examination was respectful?
- * Did you feel comfortable with this care provider? Did you feel you can establish a good relationship with him/ her?

If you answered "No" to many of these questions, this care provider is likely not suited to your needs.

Consent for Care

If you are in a same-sex relationship you cannot marry legally and your partner is not recognized by law as being able to make medical decisions for you if you can't do it for yourself (if you have a disabling illness or accident). Even with Bill 32 which gives lesbian couples the same legal status as common-law spouses, the authority for this decision would still fall to your parents, but you may not want them to make decisions for you.

A mandate (mandat d'inaptitude) lets you make important decisions in advance, or to name your partner (or someone else) as the person to make medical decisions when you cannot.

A mandate may also include a Living Will, Treatment Directive, or Durable Power of Attorney and can be drawn up with the assistance of a notary (Chambre des notaires: (514) 879-1793).

A standard mandate (mandat d'inaptitude) is a form that can be purchased through Publications Quebec (514) 873-6101 and can be filled out without a notary.

A notary can also draw up a document allowing for an adult, other than a biological parent, to make medical decisions for a child in the absence of the biological parent.

Complaints Process

Most complaints come from misunderstandings or because the doctor and patient haven't fully discussed an issue. If you have a problem with your doctor, first ask for an appointment to talk about it with him/ her. If you are not satisfied after this meeting, you can file a complaint with the Collège des médecins. Some times you may not want to talk to the doctor before filing a complaint for example, if he/ she showed sexually inappropriate behavior or obvious homophobia.

To file a complaint, write a letter to the Collège des médecins and include your name, address, and telephone number; the date(s) of service, the complaint, the name and address of any other doctor(s) you saw about the problem. If you want to talk about your complaint before sending the letter, or if you need help preparing a Statement of Complaint, phone the college directly (514)933-4441. All information is kept confidential.

Choosing a Counselor/ Therapist

Who Uses Counselors

There are many different reasons for seeking therapy. Maybe your lover left you, you lost your job, you're feeling isolated and depressed, or you are trying to change a problem like drugs or alcohol or compulsive behavior. In addition we live in a culture that is generally homophobic and this can be hard on our mental well-being and can further stress our ability to cope with losses and difficult events in our lives.

It is important that our therapist or counselor does not add to our stress. In order to be really helpful, therapy must support who we are. The counselor should understand that homophobia damages self-esteem and should reflect this in their counseling.

When you are looking for a counselor or therapist, think about what is important for you: a counselor of the same gender? Same sexual orientation? Same racial, cultural or ethnic background? Feminist? A parent?

What background, experience and training does this counselor have? Do they have special training in sexual orientation issues? Are they a member of a professional association? Make sure you are satisfied with their answers to your questions. Remember, anyone can call themselves a counselor, and there is no governing body. Be careful of any counselor who claims that his or her method is the only right way.

Ask friends and others in your community if they know a good counselor. Ask what they liked about that counselor and what kind of things they did that were helpful.

Get recommendations from organizations which serve the gay, lesbian and bisexual communities.

If you are comfortable with coming out, you could tell that counselor right away "I am a lesbian. If that's going to be a problem for you, I would like to know now so we don't waste each other's time."

Ask the counselor to describe the kind of counseling they practice. There are many different techniques and approaches. Each works for some people, but one approach may be a better fit for you than others.

Ask what their beliefs and politics are. Where do they stand on racism, sexism, sexual orientation and with gay and lesbian parenting and alternative families, etc.? A counselor who treats you with dignity, listens respectfully and values your right to self-determination are qualities you want to look for before deciding to work with them.

Ask the counselor how many sessions they think you may need.

Ask your counselor if they are willing to hear your feedback about how you think the counseling is going.

How to Get What You Need

You have the right to ask the counselor many questions. You have the right to ask personal questions, but the counselor also has the right not to answer.

Tell your therapist clearly what your goals for therapy are and/ or what issues you want to explore. The clearer you can be about your needs and the more your needs match the therapist, the more helpful counseling is likely to be.

The counselor should also let you know what they expect. Telling each other your goals and expectations is called “contracting”. Contracting means that both the client and the counselor have an agreement and understanding of what the therapy should accomplish.

As clients, we need to remember that the process of change takes time and that sometimes it might feel like there is no progress. It is important that you can talk to your counselor about these feelings.

Talk about and agree on the fee and payment arrangements at the first visit.

If you regularly examine your progress, you should notice that you can understand your feelings better and you are developing better ways to cope. You should have a sense of change and increased satisfaction in your life.

Ask your counselor how they maintain confidentiality. Many therapists are governed by a code of ethics that guarantees your protection, but some are not.

Therapist may be required to testify if subpoenaed to court and must report circumstances where there is an immediate danger to the physical safety of an individual. Otherwise, they must keep information shared by you confidential, although they may share information with a supervisor or other workers in your care team.

Important Numbers (Montreal):

Doctors: Collège des médecins: 933-4441

Psychologists: L'Ordre des psychologues: 738-1881

Alliance des psychothérapeutes gais, lesbiennes et bisexuelles: 990-7525

Social Workers: Ordre professionnel des travailleurs sociaux du Québec: 731-3925

Notaries: Chambre des notaires: 879-1793

Mandates: Publications Quebec: 873-6101

General Questions: Santé Quebec: 873-4749

Ministry of Health 1-800-707-3380