

# Best Practices in Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Health



Patricia A. Robertson, MD  
Professor, Department of Obstetrics,  
Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences  
University of California at San Francisco

# Disclosures

- None

# Prevalence of Lesbians



- 1 – 5% of the female population, depending on the methodology

# Definition of Lesbian



## Self-identified lesbians

- 70% sexually active with women only
- 30% sexually active with women and men

# Diversity among Lesbians



- Ethnic
- Age
- Educational Level
- Income
- Location

# Bisexual Women



## Increased health risks

- Delay in obtaining screening tests, such as mammograms and cholesterol screening
- Poorer mental health than lesbians and their heterosexual sisters

# Lesbian Youth Sexual Identity Fluidity

- 79 sexual minority youth followed over 10 years
  - 38 lesbian, 27 bisexual, 24 unlabeled at outset
  - after year 10
    - 67% had changed identity at least once (bisexual and unlabeled most likely to change)

Diamond, 2008

# Disclosure of Lesbian Orientation



- The majority of lesbians want their health care provider to know they are lesbian
- Lesbians unlikely to disclose sexual orientation spontaneously to the provider
- Inclusive forms important as well as diverse educational material
- Importance of disclosure especially important when hospitalized



# Some Questions to Start Today's Discussion



1. Does an accepting family improve a lesbian woman's health? What are lesbian experiences with mental health, substance issues, and IPV?
2. Do lesbians ever need birth control? What if lesbians want to have a baby?
3. Is my lesbian patient at higher risk for breast cancer? If her cancer progresses, what are the experiences of caring for lesbian patients and their partners at the end of life?

# Mental Health Issues



- Depression is increased in lesbians, especially lesbians of color
- Lesbians more often use psychotherapy than anti-depressants, compared to heterosexual women
- Study of lesbians and their sisters reveal higher self esteem in lesbians

# Family Acceptance Project

Differences between WSW health outcomes with and without family support

- depression: 22.4 vs. 63.5%
- substance problems: 48.0 vs. 68.9%
- unprotected sex: 23.7 vs. 45.9%

Ryan, 2009

# Rejecting Behaviors by Family

- Banning or removing LGBT decorations
- Telling her she will “grow out of it”
- Denying that disclosure was ever made
- Asking her to keep her identity a secret
- Banning LGBT friends/partner from home
- Telling her that she is doomed
- Excluding her from family events

# Accepting Behaviors

- Allowing LGBT decorations
- Allowing disclosure/affection afterwards
- Supporting efforts to fight LGBT discrim.
- Advocating for her when she is mistreated
- Welcoming friends/partners in the home
- Connecting a teen with LGBT role models
- Including her in family events and requiring respect from other family members

# Initiation of Drinking for Lesbian and Bisexual Female Youth

Girls who reported a lesbian or bisexual identity (N = 61), were more likely to report that they began drinking before the age of 12 (13%) than heterosexual girls (2%)

Ziyadeh, 2006

# Treatment for Alcoholism

- Lesbians experience AA as a potentially liberating but also as a potentially oppressive experience
- 74% of recovering lesbians relied on other sources of support in addition to AA

Hall, 1994

# Framework Treatment of Alcoholism in Lesbians

Safety for disclosure of sexual orientation  
may be related to satisfaction with  
substance abuse treatment

Maccio, 2002



# Interpersonal Violence

- Incidence: 30 – 40% of lesbians have been involved in physically abusive relationships

West, 2002

- Definition: a pattern of violence/coercive behavior whereby a lesbian seeks to control the thoughts, beliefs or conduct of her intimate partner to punish the intimate partner for resisting the perpetrator's control.

Hart, 1986

# Frequent Factors in Lesbian IPV

- Intimidation, sexual abuse, physical abuse, isolation, minimizing, denying, blaming the abused, using economic abuse, using coercion and threats often about “outing” the victim to friends, family, employer. Allen, 1999

- Perpetrator often older, more powerful

Ristock, 2003

# Psychological Abuse with IPV

- Verbally threatened
- Demeaned in front of friends, relatives or strangers
- Experienced interrupted sleep/eating habits
- Had property destroyed or damaged

Renzetti, 1989

# Contraceptive Myth



- Lesbians don't need birth control
  - 15% of lesbians sexually active with men
  - Increased rate of unintended pregnancy of lesbian and questioning youth compared to heterosexual female youth

Saewyc, 1999

# Lesbians and Oral Contraceptives



- A course of oral contraceptives may decrease the prevalence of ovarian cancer by 50%
- Treatment for endometriosis
- Treatment for PCO
- Treatment for dysmenorrhea
- About 50% of lesbians have had OCPs, average duration 40 months

Marrazo, 2001

# Lesbians and Plan B

- For lesbians who have sex with men, often casual sex with a friend which is unplanned
- Offer adolescents a sample or prescription of Plan B to have at home if safe from parental discovery

# Reproductive Options for Lesbians

- Insemination by known or unknown donor  
(donor ID release option at age 18 of child)
- Intercourse
- Co-maternity in which one partner donates an egg by IVF, egg is fertilized in the lab and the embryo is placed in the uterus of her partner

# Lesbians and Parenting

- About 16% of lesbians have given birth (N = 11,876, Cochran, 2001)
- Many lesbians become parents by adoption, co-parenting, foster-parenting, insemination, intercourse



# Pregnancy Planning for Lesbians

- Multi-vitamins or prenatal vitamins three months prior to conception
- Consideration of known vs. unknown donor
- Blood work at annual exam to include rubella antibodies, HIV screen, CF testing, etc.

# Gaybe Boom

- Two to six million children in the United States being raised by LGBT parents
  - Metro areas with highest % of these parents:
    - Salt Lake City
    - Memphis
    - Virginia Beach
    - Detroit
    - San Antonio
- Williams/UCLA

# Legal Aspects of Lesbian Parenting

- Seek legal advice prior to conception
- Packet available at the National Center for Lesbian Rights
- Same – Sex marriage
- Co-parent adoption

# Enhancing Perinatal Care for LGBT Patients

Kaiser Oakland by E. Losada MD

- create access to centralized source of information re: LGBT pregnancy, adoption, foster parenting
- write booklet for LGBT enrollees about Kaiser policies re: insemination, fresh, frozen sperm, etc

# Losada Project

- create a perception that Kaiser cares for a constellation of families; books, etc
- be sure prenatal classes have inclusive language
- have LGBT friendly forms, parent #1, #2
- offer longitudinal visits
- do not marginalize the non-bio mom

# Children of Lesbian Couples

- No difference in sexual orientation, self-esteem or emotional health compared to heterosexual parented children
- 1 – 6 M children in the U.S. are being raised by same-sex parents
- Children of lesbian couples appeared to be less aggressive, more nurturing, more tolerant of diversity, more androgynous

# Quality of Life of Adolescents Raised by Lesbian Mothers

Adolescents raised by lesbian mothers rated their quality of life statistically the same compared to adolescents raised by heterosexual parents.

Van Gelderen, 2012

# Psychological Adjustment of Adolescents Raised by Lesbian Mothers

- rated significantly higher in social and school/academic competence
- rated significantly lower in social problems, rule-breaking, aggressive and externalizing problem behavior
- compared to age-matched counterparts in Achenbach's normative sample of American youth

Gartrell, 2010



# Breast Cancer in Lesbians

- 5.8% for life-time lesbians
- 7.0% for adult lesbians
- 4.9% for female heterosexuals

WHI

# Risk Factors for Lesbians with Breast Cancer

- Current and past smoking
- Nulliparity
- Breastfeeding history
- Previous breast biopsy
- Obesity
- Current alcohol use
- Past problem with alcohol

# Screening for Breast Cancer in Lesbians

- Mammograms: mixed results of decreased screening to appropriate screening
- Clinical Breast Exam: lesbians less likely to have had a CBE within 2 years

# Breast Cancer Support Groups for Lesbians

- Difficult to access for their needs
- Deciding to “come out” in the group
- Emphasis on the “man’s attachment to the woman’s breast rather than her recovery”
- Lesbian-specific groups under-resourced

# Quality of Life for Lesbian Breast Cancer Survivors

Quality of life scores similar between heterosexual breast cancer survivors and lesbian breast cancer survivors.

Jabson, 2011

# Views on Hospice and Palliative Care

- Lesbians held significantly more positive beliefs about hospice and alternative medical care
- Heterosexual women reported significantly greater desire of life-sustaining treatments in the event of an incurable disease

June, 2011

# Decision to Enter Hospice

- Concern about homophobia, fear or prior experience of being denied treatment, fear or prior experience of discrimination, desire to hide sexual orientation, current or history of family discord related to sexual orientation, issues unsettled re: custody of children

# Grieving Loss of Lesbian Life-Partner

- Complicated grief in up to 25% of all survivors
- Lesbians who have lost their life-partner and have not disclosed their identity to family or friends are at particular risk for grief that cannot be openly acknowledged, publically mourned or socially supported



# Best Practices in Providing Lesbian Health Care

- Welcoming office: encourage disclosure, be supportive
- Appropriate screening (Pap, substance use, mammogram, depression, lipids, colonoscopy, BMI, IPV, etc)
- Family planning discussion early and often
- Power of health care decision paperwork, etc.
- Involvement in the community/hospital as an advocate for lesbian/bisexual health

# Next Steps

- Check your intake forms
- Educate your staff
- Provide diverse reading and educational material: provide also in private restrooms
- Ask your patients about their sexual activity/orientation
- Be supportive and provide resources
- Be aware of workplace issues for your LGBT colleagues (Eliason, 2011)

# Thank You

You Can Make a Significant Difference in  
the Health Outcomes of  
Your Lesbian Patients!