

SPOTLIGHT ON ADVOCACY

CULTURAL COMPETENCY AND THE LGBT COMMUNITY

By Phillip Williams

The LGBT community has the same health needs as the general population, but experience health disparities and barriers related to sexual orientation, and/or gender identity or expression. Many avoid or delay care or receive inappropriate or inferior care because of perceived or real homophobia, bi-phobia, trans-phobia, and discrimination by health care providers and institutions. That's where cultural competency comes in. What is it you say? Cultural competency is the acknowledgement of one's cultural differences and ethnic identities. Health care providers can take positive steps to promote the health of their LGBT patients by examining their practices, offices, policies and staff training for ways to improve access to quality health care for LGBT people.

I run a LGBT support group on Tuesday afternoons at *Rainbow Heights Club*, a psychosocial club for LGBT mental health consumers called the *Zappalorti Society*. The group is a spin-off of the Zappalorti Society meeting led at the LGBT Community Center in Manhattan on Saturday afternoons, which is facilitated by my mentor, Robert Coffman. Coffman has been running the group since February 1992.

The Zappalorti Society was named for a LGBT mental health consumer named Jimmy Zappalorti. He was a military veteran who worked in the family business, stained-glass making, for a number of years. Zappalorti was murdered in January 1990 by two men who recognized that he was gay and mentally ill. Police refused to listen to his claim that he was being stalked. The case was deemed as a hate crime. One of the prisoners died in jail while the other was denied parole by a Richmond County judge because he didn't express remorse for his crime. The *Zappalorti Society* was created in his memory. I've been leading the Tuesday group for a little over a year now.

The *Zappalorti Society* is run with a mediator leading a discussion on various topics relating to LGBT mental health. There's often a dual stigma with LGBT people with mental illness. First, they're non-straight, and second, they have a mental illness. Topics have ranged from housing, employment, education, and

health care to current and popular gay culture in audio/visual and print media.

Unfortunately, confidentiality is not stressed enough, because some of the comments that are made in the group can be graphic and revealing. Understanding one's cultural and ethnic history goes a long way to provide positive feedback to group participants. Most providers, particularly those in the mental health community, feel that it's not necessary to collect information about their clients' cultural and ethnic histories.

There is a mental health professional that has been trying to change providers' attitudes about cultural competency. Dr. Christian Huygen is the Executive Director of *Rainbow Heights Club*. For almost a decade, Dr. Huygen has done trainings and seminars stressing the importance of providers learning about their clients' cultural and ethnic histories. One example is creating forms that ask more specific questions such as sexual orientation, gender identification, and relationship status. This raises a few questions, like why should LGBT consumer reveal personal information about him/her to their providers.

As Dr. Huygen has explained time and time again, providers need to serve the LGBT community better. They have issues that set them apart from straights. They need to be addressed in a confidential, non-judgmental manner. Collecting specific information may seem probing but it can be beneficial in receiving the best possible treatment. Another question was raised by my best friend of five years. He was concerned that a LGBT person claiming both his and her sexual orientation/gender identity and mental illness can be dangerous. This can lead to more discrimination from others, particularly the mental health community. According to him, one should put either sexual orientation/gender identity first or mental illness—not to claim both. I see his point, but one has to keep in mind that a LGBT person can be both non-straight and mental and they can't be ignored if one is to live a healthy, prosperous life.

By keeping these things in mind when dealing with LGBT health consumers, the health care provider can ensure that a trip to the doctor's office for a member of the LGBT community will be a pleasant one