

SPIRITUAL CARE

considerations series



The Spiritual Care Considerations series equips all carers with basic information to help you think about the spiritual needs of the person in your care. They are a prompt to give you ideas for conversation with the person you are supporting and/or their loved ones. Meaningful Ageing Australia members can access more information under the Member's Zone Resources Clearing House www.meaningfulageing.org.au

Intersex Older People

This *Consideration* aims to give you the tools to address the spiritual needs of the older person who is intersex. It is one part of a three-part Spiritual Care Consideration for LGBTI people. People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/gender diverse, or are intersex (LGBTI) should always be seen and treated as people first. Inclusive practice is more than saying "we treat everyone the same". It means recognising that everyone is a unique individual with diverse needs. Some people need more of your help and understanding. Part of this is recognising that people from LGBTI communities are not all alike. Though they share a history of discrimination and movements in human rights, each group have specific needs and within each group is a lot of diversity.

Terms and definitions

Sex: A person's physical characteristics relating to sex, including genitalia, chromosomes or hormones, and also secondary sex characteristics that emerge at puberty.

Intersex: A person who is born with sex characteristics (including genitals, gonads and chromosome patterns) that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies. Intersex is about biology, not gender.

Gender: The way someone chooses to publicly express their gender, through name, pronoun, clothing, haircut, mannerisms etc. Gender conforming refers to behaviour and modes of presentation that match the dominant social expectations of the sex someone was assigned at birth. Gender non-conforming involves behaviour and modes of presentation that do not match the dominant social expectations of the sex someone was assigned at birth.

Gender Identity: A person's deeply felt sense of being a man or a woman, both, neither, or in between. For example, an individual who has no gender identity or a gender identity that is neutral may refer to themselves as agender or gender free. Some people's gender identity may vary according to where they are and who they are with.

Sexual orientation: Describes a person's sexual or emotional attraction to another person based on that other person's sex and/or gender. The term is restricted in law to sex only and refers to attraction to persons of: the same sex (gay and lesbian); different sex (heterosexual); or persons of both the same and different sex (bisexual). Pansexual is a term that is used to describe someone who is sexually and emotionally attracted to other people regardless of their sex, gender or gender identity.

1. How your beliefs influence your care

Many of us have grown up with negative messages about the LGBTI communities, that they are wrong or immoral, some people still feel this way. This can understandably make you feel uncomfortable caring for an older LGBTI person. If this is causing you personal grief or inner conflict to the point where it is affecting your work, it is important to raise this with your team leaders to discuss your options. Inclusive practice is not about trying to change you or your values, but ensuring that everyone is treated with respect and their needs are being met.

2. Spiritual needs and influence of history for intersex people

LGBTI people have historically not been treated equally under Federal and State or Territory laws and as non-discriminatory laws have been introduced, achieving equality and equity within society has been slower. In addition, many people from these communities have experienced discrimination, abuse and stigma over much of their life including from their own family, medical practitioners and society in general. This history has led to many older LGBTI people feeling a distrust of institutions and a deep fear of discrimination within services. This fear can lead to the older person hiding their gender identity or intersex status when they enter care.

Most intersex people are unrecognisable from non-intersex people. Approximately 1 in 4 intersex people were assigned a sex at birth by their parents or doctors and might have been operated on at a young age. Some of them may reject the sex they were raised as, and many have a deep distrust of medical practitioners. Approximately 4% of intersex people were assigned the wrong sex at birth. Many are also made to feel from a young age that their bodies are shameful and must be kept a secret. This is very isolating. Many intersex people are also infertile and do not disclose to anyone that they are intersex. It is possible the older person was not able to have children and this may be a source of grief for them.

- Older intersex people have spiritual needs like everyone else. They have the need to belong, feel safe and have meaningful connections with others, nature, creativity and for some, God. For these connections to occur the person needs to feel safe.
- Many intersex people have experienced harm by the medical profession, and may have experienced issues with religious organisations about expectations of what it means to be a man or a woman.
- Most intersex people are heterosexual and are biologically unable to have children.
- Stereotypes relating to men and women can be challenging to people who are intersex. For instance, assumptions that a newly married couple will have children, or that all girls menstruate. An older person may carry memories of emotionally painful experiences in relation to these stereotypes.
- Some trans, gender diverse and intersex people have been taught that even God rejects them. You could say: *We are inclusive and non-judgemental at (*your organisation), you are safe here and we will do our best to make you feel comfortable.*

3. Caring for an intersex older person

- Remember to respond to the older person as a person first.
- Don't assume trans, gender diverse or intersex status by the way an older person looks.
- Don't assume that the person has children.
- You should be mindful of the language you use: "tranny" is not an acceptable term to describe trans or gender diverse people, nor is 'he/she' or 'hermaphrodite' in relation to intersex people. These terms have been used to shame and humiliate trans, gender diverse and intersex people and may make the older person feel unwelcome in your care.
- Avoid gossiping about your special older person and respect their privacy and needs.

For more resources and links to useful reading for your own information on *Intersex Older People* visit the Meaningful Ageing website Member's Zone. *With thanks to Dr Sue Malta (National Ageing Research Institute), Reverend John Clarke and Reverend Judy Angwin (Uniting Agewell), and Organisation Intersex International Australia for their assistance in preparing this Consideration.*