

Attitudes of the LGBTQ+ Community Regarding Oral Healthcare Accessibility and Inclusivity

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To better understand how members of the LGBTQ+ community view and approach their oral healthcare. Previous research has shown that discrimination and stigma as faced by the LGBTQ+ population, has a direct, negative effect on both mental and general health. By further investigating attitudes toward oral health amongst the LGBTQ+ population, we hope to better understand two important matters: 1) Do individuals in the community avoid oral healthcare due to fear of discrimination? 2) In what ways can dental providers/facilities create inclusive environments and/or encourage patients to seek the care they need?

Methods: A Survey Questionnaire was made available to patients of the NYC Health + Hospitals Pride centers via the institution's corporate SurveyMonkey account. Flyers with a unique QR code were distributed and posted in the Pride Center Clinics for participants to access the survey. Once the QR code was scanned, participants were given information on the study as well as risks and benefits of participation. Completing the survey indicated their consent to participate. Participants submitted their survey responses anonymously.

Results: Response rate was N=38. Ninety one percent (N=36) felt that dental care is a necessity and affects overall health and quality of life. Thirty-five percent (N=13) of these individuals indicated a time where they did not receive dental healthcare in the last 12 months, with 37% (N=5) of them reporting fear of discrimination as a reason not to seek dental care. Additionally, 22% (N=8) of those who visited the dentist in the last 12 months (N=24) reported being treated unfairly in a dental office because of their sexual identity/orientation.

Conclusion: A significant number of LGBTQ+ members had difficulty accessing dental care, with a notable number reporting fear of discrimination holding them back. While the results of this exploratory study are limited due to a small population size, it is evident that clinics dedicated for the LGBTQ+ community, are both meaningful and preferable to some patients.

INTRODUCTION

LGBTQ+ is an abbreviation that stands for "Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer, and others". According to the Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey, eight percent or about 20 million, of the adult population in the United States identify themselves as part of the LGBTQ+ community.¹ While increased support and awareness, including the establishment of progressive legislation, has helped members of the LGBTQ+ community gain better access to proper healthcare, social stigma and discrimination still exists. Current research has identified the healthcare disparities that exist among these individuals, however, little research has been conducted on this topic in relation to LGBTQ+ individuals within the dental healthcare setting.

The understanding that oral health has a direct correlation to systemic health is becoming more widely accepted. It is known that diseases such as diabetes, dementia, cardiovascular disease, and HIV can affect oral health and in turn, poor oral health can worsen other systemic issues.² Additionally, it has been found that members of the LGBTQ+ population report that they are receiving lower rates of preventive dental services in comparison to heteronormative individuals.³ Similar to their experience with medical care, LGBTQ+ individuals have faced challenges finding accepting dental providers with welcoming practices.⁴ Office in-take forms, such as medical history forms, may not include inclusive language and, therefore, can create an isolating atmosphere for LGBTQ+ individuals.⁵ This lack of inclusivity can stem from a lack of awareness and education of the dental professional.

The State of New York is known to have one of the highest percentages of LGBTQ+ residents.⁶ Furthermore, NYC Health + Hospitals is the largest municipal healthcare system in the United States.⁷ Around 2011, NYC Health + Hospitals opened their first Pride Health Center, a comprehensive health center dedicated to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer patients.⁷ Today, there are a total of seven Pride Centers serving the LGBTQ+ community of NYC. Analysis of this population would add significant data to previously published findings and hopefully encourage other medical institutions to create similar programs and practices for their LGBTQ+ patients.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

An 18-question survey was made available to patients of the NYC Health + Hospitals Pride Centers via the institution's corporate SurveyMonkey account, a secure online database that tracks participant responses anonymously. The survey asked questions that included questions about demographics, feelings towards oral healthcare, experiences in dental healthcare settings, and viewpoint of Pride Centers. Flyers with a unique QR code were distributed and posted in NYC Health + Hospitals Pride Center Clinics for interested participants to access the survey. Once the QR code is scanned, participants are given information on the study as well as the risks and benefits of participation. Their continuation with completing the survey indicates their consent to participate. Participants submit their survey responses anonymously. The data was compiled and analyzed using standard statistical methodology.

RESULTS

Thirty eight individuals participated in this survey.

Dental Healthcare

- Ninety one percent (N=36) of the participants in this survey agree with the statement, "I think dental care is a necessity and it affects my overall health and quality of life." However, only 24 individuals saw a dentist within the last year while 14 individuals saw a dentist more than one year ago.
- Twenty-two percent (N=8) of those who visited the dentist in the last 12 months reported being treated unfairly in a dental office because of their sexual identity or sexual orientation.
- During the last 12 months, 35% (N=13) indicated a time where they believed they needed dental care but could not receive it. Furthermore, 37% (N=5) of these individuals reported that one reason they were unable to receive dental care was due to fear of discrimination.
- Participants were asked to respond to statements in regard to inclusivity (Graph 1), and their feelings/experiences in medical and dental care settings as a member of the LGBTQ+ community (Graph 2).

Pride Center

- Thirty five out of 38 respondents answered the question: "What made you choose to seek care at the Pride Center?"
- Of those who responded, 57% (N=20) believed that the Pride Center would be better able to address their needs.
- The same respondents were asked the follow-up question: "How do you feel the Pride Center has affected your care?"
 - 63% (N=22) felt as though their healthcare needs are better understood/addressed at the Pride Center.
 - 66% (N=23) felt more welcomed and comfortable to discuss health-related concerns and questions at the Pride Center.
 - 57% (N=20) felt as though they are more respected and taken seriously as a patient of the Pride Center.
- Furthermore, 83% (N=29) of participants agreed that their experiences at the Pride Center have made them more inclined to seek medical care when they need it.
- Ninety-one percent (N=32) felt that a clinic that provides inclusive care to LGBTQ+ community created an environment where they feel more comfortable receiving care.
- Eighty-six percent (N=30) agreed that if the Pride Center, or similar clinics dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community offered dental services, they would be more inclined to see the dentist.

CONCLUSIONS

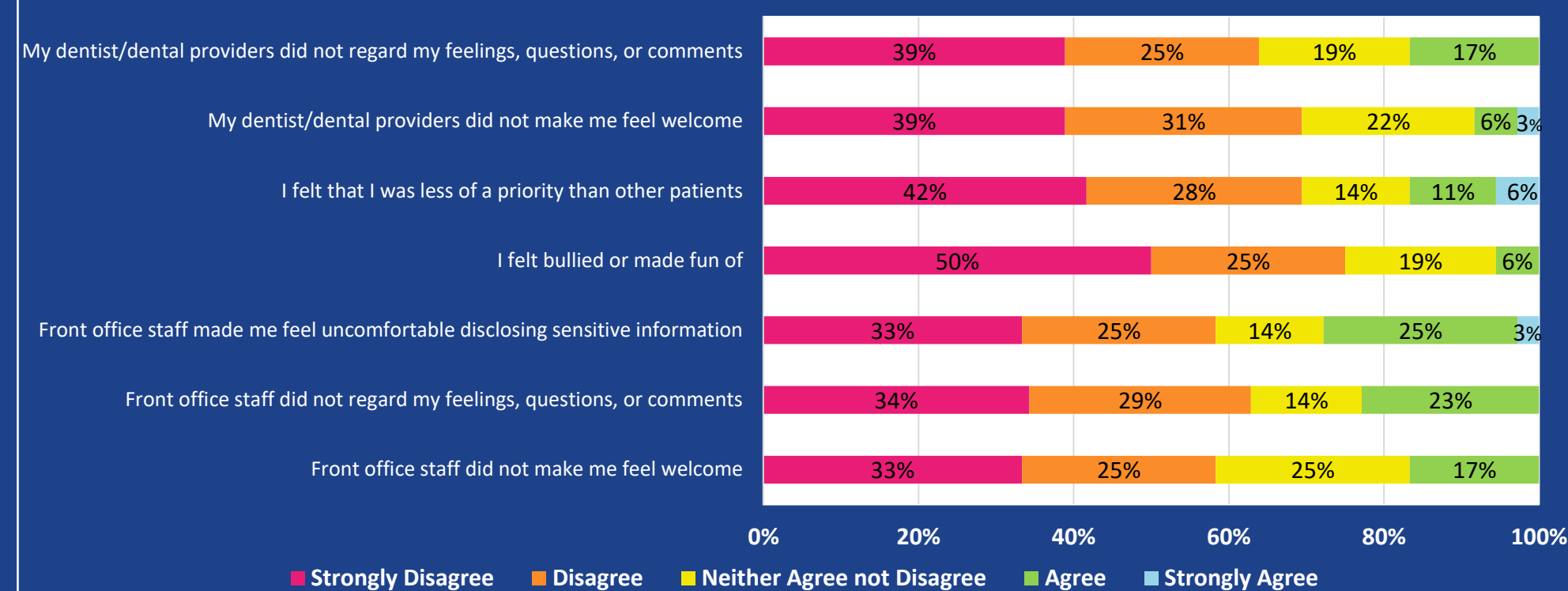
Based on this study's results, the following conclusions can be made:

- LGBTQ+ individuals value the importance of oral healthcare.
- A significant number of LGBTQ+ members had difficulty accessing dental care, with a notable number reporting that fear of discrimination is what held them back.
- While the results of this exploratory study are limited due to a small population size, it is evident that clinics dedicated for the LGBTQ+ community, such as NYC + Health and Hospitals Pride Centers, are both meaningful and preferable.
- Given how beneficial Pride Centers have been for the LGBTQ+ population seeking medical care, comprehensive dental care should be considered as an essential addition to their healthcare services.
- In addition, the shortcomings and feelings towards oral healthcare that were identified by the individuals who completed this survey, signify a need to better educate dental healthcare members to improve the overall experiences of the LGBTQ+ community.

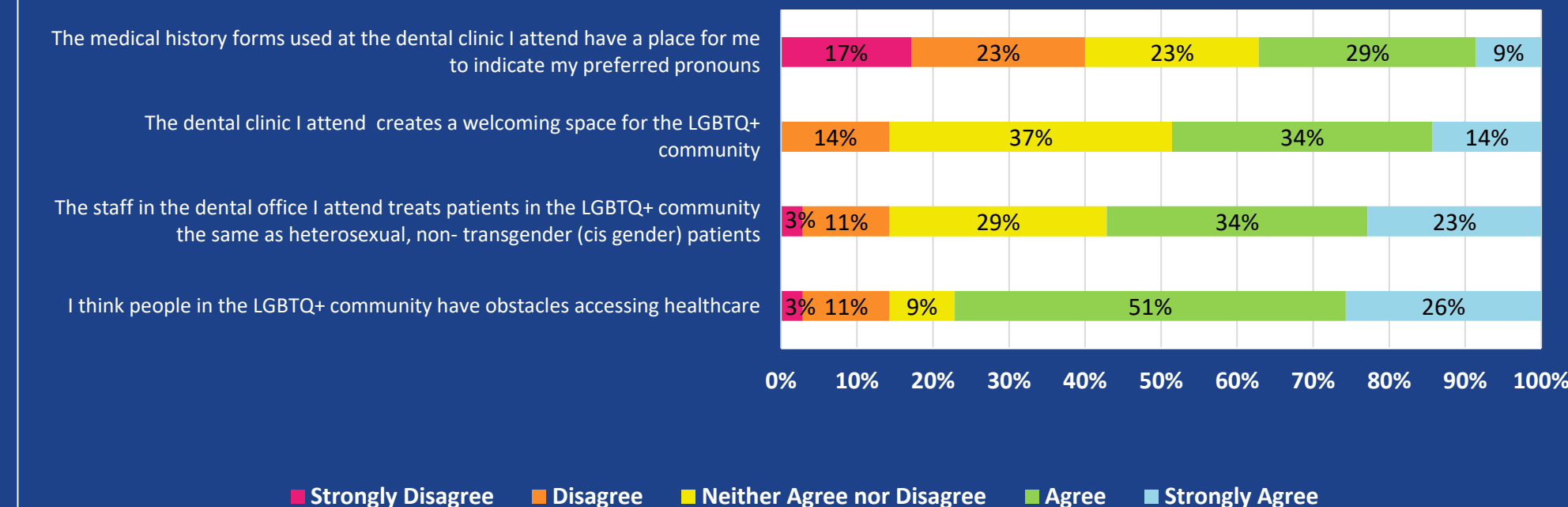
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Graph 1. Feelings/Experiences in Dental Care Settings



Graph 2. Feelings/Experiences in Health & Dental Care Settings



Credit: Penn Dental Medicine