



Understanding the Health Needs of LGBT Veterans in the Department of Veterans Affairs

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Poll Question #1

- What is your primary role in VA?
 - student, trainee, or fellow
 - clinician
 - researcher
 - manager or policy-maker
 - I am not affiliated with the VA.

Poll Question #2

- How knowledgeable are you about issues related to LGBT Veterans in the VA?
 - Very knowledgeable
 - Somewhat knowledgeable
 - Somewhat unknowledgeable
 - Completely unknowledgeable

LGB in the Military

- In 1993, Public Law 103-160 enacted: “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (DADT)”
 - Over **14,000** LGB discharged under DADT: disproportionate numbers of women and minorities.
 - Nearly **114,000** servicemembers discharged since WWII because of actual/perceived homosexuality
 - Many discharged may have received dishonorable discharges, barring them from VA medical care and other benefits.
 - Current House legislation (Pocan: Wisconsin & Rangel: New York) would allow those given dishonorable discharges to update their records for benefit eligibility.
- Most recent estimates suggest that those who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) represent **2.2%** of military personnel*

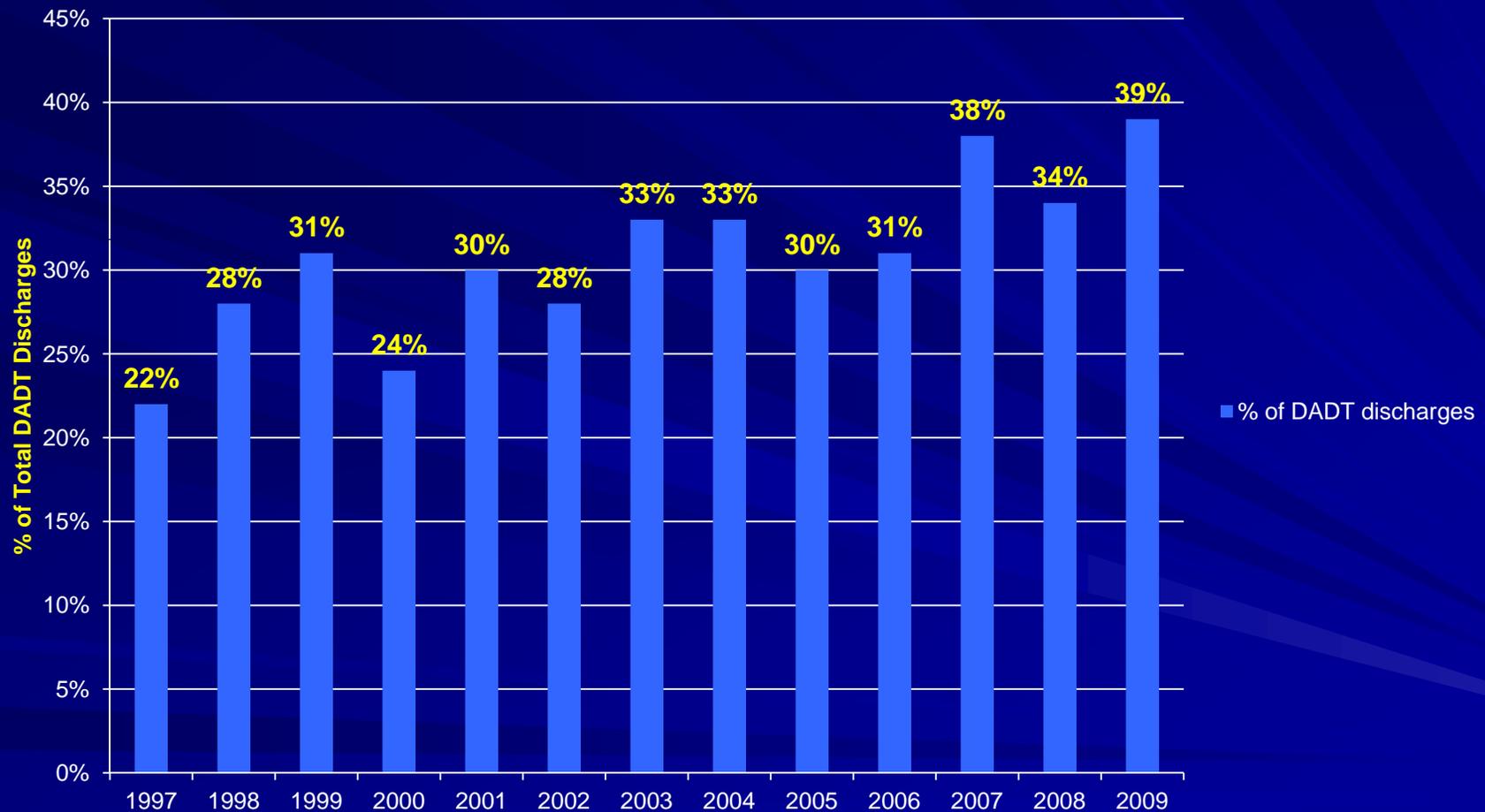
*Gates G. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual men and women in the US military: Updated estimates. The Williams Institute, May 2010.

Discharges Under Don't Ask, Don't Tell (1994-2009)



Gates, G. Discharges Under DADT: Women and Ethnic Minorities. September 2010.
The Williams Institute.

Percent of women among DADT discharges



Gates, G. Discharges Under DADT: Women and Ethnic Minorities. September 2010.
The Williams Institute.

How many LGBT Veterans in the VA?

- We have no idea!
- No data available for number of LGBT Veterans in VA system.
 - No systematic data collection upon enrollment that includes sexual orientation
 - Given military estimates (perhaps 66,000 LGB servicemembers at any given time?), VA could be largest integrated provider of care to LGBT populations.

LGBT in the VA

- While DADT was a DoD policy, there were likely ripple effects to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA):
 - Fear that disclosure of sexual orientation would be documented in charts/shared would possibly impact pension benefits
 - Fear that disclosure might impact future military service under DADT.
 - General fear of disclosure of sexual orientation to healthcare providers
- VA promotes environment of patient-centered care, so important to consider patient's disclosure/non-disclosure preferences in context of optimal care.

What do we know about LGBT Veterans' Health?

Might LGBT Veterans Experience Dual Health Disparities?

- Existing research on Veterans' health disparities:
 - Poor perceived self-health, high rates of utilization, multiple medical comorbidities
 - High rates of PTSD, depression, substance abuse
- Existing research on LGBT health disparities:
 - Higher rates of smoking, obesity, exposure to traumatic events, suicidality, substance abuse
- How do these health disparities interact for LGBT Veterans?

Lesbian and bisexual (LB) Veterans

- Compared to heterosexual Veterans and civilian women, LB Veterans experience higher rates of:
 - Childhood and adult sexual and physical violence
 - Substance abuse
 - Mental health problems
 - Increased suicidal ideation
- LB Veterans report higher rates of military sexual trauma (MST) than heterosexual women Veterans. Unclear if MST was related to perceived sexual orientation during military service.

Lehavot K & Simpson T. (2013). Incorporating Lesbian and Bisexual Women into Women Veterans' Health Priorities. *Journal of General Internal Medicine* (in press). Mattocks K, Sadler A, Yano E, Krebs E, Zephyrin L, Brandt C, Kimerling R, Sandfort T, Dichter M, Weiss, J, Allison J, Haskell S. Sexual victimization, health status, and VA healthcare utilization among lesbian and bisexual OEF/OIF veterans. *Journal of General Internal Medicine* (in press). Blosnich J, Foynes M, Shipherd J: Health disparities among sexual minority women veterans. *J Womens Health* 2013. 2013 Jun 8. [Epub ahead of print]. Booth B, Davis T, Cheney A, Mengeling M, Torner J, Sadler A. Physical health status of female veterans: Contributions of sex partnership and in-military rape. *Psychosomatic Medicine*; 2012; 74: 916-924.

Gay Veterans

- Few targeted studies of this group to understand general health disparities/healthcare utilization.
- Many existing studies of gay Veterans focus on various aspects of HIV.
- Some existing studies suggest elevated risks of substance abuse, PTSD, and depression.
 - Data suggest that military service before repeal of DADT ———> Concealment of sexual identity, leading to high rates of depression & PTSD

Cook, R.L., McGinnis, K.A., Fiellin, D.A., Goulet, J.L., Gordon, A.J., Samet J., Mattocks, K., Crystal, S., Kraemer, K.L., Braithwaite, S., Rodriguez-Barradas, M., Justice, A.C. (2010). Erectile dysfunction drug receipt, risky sexual behavior and sexually transmitted diseases in HIV-Infected and HIV-uninfected men. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 25(2), 115-21.

Blosnich, J. & Silenzio, V. (in press). Physical health indicators among lesbian, gay, and bisexual U.S. Veterans. *Annals of Epidemiology*

Transgender Veterans

- Transgender persons still prohibited from military service.
- Identification in VA medical record: some meet standards for Gender Identity Disorder (GID), so identifiable via ICD coding.
- GID prevalence in VA: **22.9/100,000** persons
 - GID prevalence in US: **4.3/100,000** persons
- 246 new Veterans diagnosed with GID each year in VA.
- Use of VA **5 times higher** among GID Veterans than other Veterans.
- Veterans with GID had risk for suicide-related events **20X higher** than for general VHA Veteran population.
- Evidence suggests that the growing presence of transgender support groups within VA have been beneficial to patients.

Shipherd, J. C., Mizock, L., Maguen, S., & Green, K. E. (2012). Male-to-female transgender veterans and VA health care utilization. *International Journal of Sexual Health*, 24(1), 78-87. Shipherd, J.C., Maguen, S., Skidmore, W.C., & Abramovitz, S.M. (2011). Potentially traumatic events in a transgender sample: Frequency and associated symptoms. *Traumatology*, 17(20), 56-67. Shipherd, J. C., Green, K. E., & Abramovitz, S. (2010). Transgender clients: Identifying and minimizing barriers to mental health treatment. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 14(2), 94-108. Maguen, S., Shipherd, J. C., & Harris, H. N. (2005). Providing culturally sensitive care for transgender patients. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 12(4), 479-490.

VA Providers

- Previous non-VA studies suggest LGBT patients worry about poor care, discrimination, and rejection from providers.
 - Patients may engage in protective behaviors to mask sexual orientation.
 - Healthy People 2020: Providers should facilitate open discussion re: sexuality
- A recent VA study suggests more than 50% of providers didn't ask about sexual orientation, but assumed the patient would bring it up if it was important*.

*Sherman, M., Kauth, M., Ridener, L., Shipherd, J.C. Bratkovich, K. & Beaulieu, G.: Welcoming Sexual and Gender Minority Veterans to VA Care: Challenges and Recommendations. *Under review.*

VA Policies and Programs Designed to Improve Care for LGBT Veterans

VA Policies/Practices Targeting Improved LGBT Care

■ Office of Health Equity LGBT Workgroup:

- “Sexual orientation” and “gender identity expression” now included in VA non-discrimination policies
- Deputy Under Secretary for Health encouraged VA facilities to participate in Human Rights Campaign Health Equality Index: 121 VA facilities participated in the self study.
- Learn more about HEI: <http://www.hrc.org/hei>
- **Results of VA HEI: 76%** of participating VA hospitals were awarded 2013 HEI Equality Leader status, a designation awarded hospitals and clinics that meet foundational criteria for equitable LGBT care.

VA Policies/Practices Targeting Improved LGBT Care

- **VA Transgender Health Policy (June 2011)**
 - General health care, mental health care, hormone therapy, pre-operative evaluation for sex reassignment surgery, and medically necessary post-operative care.
 - Transgender Veterans should be referred to by the name and gender they prefer, regardless of legal status.
- **Transgender Education Workgroup (Office of Patient Care Services)**
 - Webinars, toolkits, online repository of transgender healthcare resources

Dedicated LGBT Program Coordinators

- **Office of Patient Care Services:** Hired 2 LGBT Program Coordinators.
 - Advise senior VA leadership on LGBT policy/practice related to LGBT Veterans.
 - Spearheading development of educational initiatives and clinical consultation programs.
 - Adapt current educational materials (e.g. a Caregiver support manual) and create new ones (e.g. VA LGBT Fact Sheet).

VA Policies/Practices Targeting Improved LGBT Care

- New **postdoctoral psychology fellowship** program for LGBT Health (launching September 2013).
 - Seven fellowships funded in first year.
- **LGBT Research Working Group**
 - Monthly calls to feature ongoing VA research dedicated to understanding LGBT Veterans.
 - 50 VA investigators nationwide
 - Identify gaps in research/share methodology

Future Directions

- Need systematic data collection strategies in VA
- Research examining after-effects of DADT
 - Physical and mental health conditions
 - Healthcare utilization
 - Experiences with military sexual trauma and intimate partner violence
- Improving cultural competence of providers

Questions or interested in LGBT Research Workgroup?

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- Office: 413-584-4040 x2060

LGBT Health Journal

- **LGBT Health** is the quarterly peer-reviewed journal dedicated to promoting optimal healthcare for millions of sexual and gender minority persons worldwide by focusing specifically on health while maintaining sufficient breadth to encompass the full range of relevant biopsychosocial and health policy issues. This Journal aims to promote greater awareness of the health concerns particular to each sexual minority population, and to improve availability and delivery of culturally competent healthcare services.
- <http://www.liebertpub.com/manuscript/lgbt-health/618/>
- Journal editor: Dr. William Byne (william.byne@va.gov)

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