

The need to respect a person's identity: experiences of a transgender man

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One night, I decided to meet up with someone and I was assaulted. I went to the emergency department of my own volition. At the front desk, I immediately informed them why I was there and that I identify as a trans man. I told them that some of the information on my health card did not match my identity, what name I preferred and my pronouns. I got a very long silence from the nurse and clerk and then they just said, “Okay.”

Somebody came around periodically to check who hadn't been seen yet, and they consistently deadnamed me. I repeatedly told them the name I preferred. I eventually got seen, and I still kept getting deadnamed and misgendered. I was getting a very specific attitude from everyone I saw. I even had someone laugh at me when I corrected them.

As an example, my mother's legal name is Elizabeth. She goes by Liz and that's what she prefers to be called when she's in the hospital. That was the equivalent of what I was asking. I asked everyone to “Call me Alex,” which is a shortened version of my deadname, and no one would. Everyone very specifically called me by my full deadname and they misgendered me.

During my stay at the hospital, I saw a sexual assault nurse. I had an anal laceration, but she insisted on performing a vaginal exam. I declined because I felt it was both dysphoria-inducing and medically unnecessary. She very much pushed for it and seemed upset when I refused it.

If I was to summarize my experience in the ED, it felt like everyone was content to see me as a confused woman rather than a trans man. I had just gone through something extremely traumatic, and this experience in the ED was retraumatizing. In my community, the deliberate and purposeful misgendering of people is considered harassment. Educating people and dealing with constant ignorance is extremely tiring.

I find people tend to sometimes make jokes or choice comments that are inappropriate. I had a former ED nurse who, when we talked about trans patients, spoke about having inserted a urinary catheter into a former trans patient. She said, rather flippantly “You never know what you're going to find down there with trans people, right?”

But my family physician has been a champion for me. When I told him about my experience in the ED, he felt very strongly that I should see my chart and he gave it to me. He also felt I should make a formal complaint, which I did. He made sure that I was physically, mentally and emotionally okay after that experience. It has been six months since my complaint, and I haven't heard back.

Comparatively, I recently had a bicycle accident and went to an urgent care clinic that, I think, modelled proper behaviour. They had signs at the intake desk that had a Progress Pride flag on them that said, “We want to get your pronouns right.” They asked people to alert the intake clerk as to what pronouns they

use and whether they identify as anything other than what is on their health card. This is wonderful, not only because they were not just asking the people who look gender-nonconforming or who look trans; they were asking everybody to ensure there was no confusion. Having that as a first step so that you can alert the clerk that, “Yes, I am transgender. Yes, my health card still says I am female, but I am a trans man,” is a welcoming and great first step.

It is one thing to have these enforcements in place, and another to respect them. In my hospital chart, it said, “Female identifies as man; she presents with” You have to use the right pronouns. You actually have to respect the person's identity. You can't just roll your eyes or misrepresent them in a chart. —Alexander Watson

**As told to Andreas Laupacis MD MSc
Deputy editor, *CMAJ***

This article has not been peer reviewed.

Consent has been given for this perspective to be shared.

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