

TGEA Discusses Transgender Medical Issues with California Nursing Students and Providers

On a recent trip to California, TGEA Board Member Sarah Huggins had the opportunity to mix outreach with vacation time when she provided her insights of transgender medical issues to first-year medical students at Orange County's Saddleback College, and also to the medical and administrative staff at the College Hospital of Costa Mesa.

The events were arranged by Sarah's sister-in-law, Dr. Barbara Huggins, who is the Department Co-Chair of Nursing for Saddleback College. Sarah addressed questions from both groups as they sought to understand more deeply some of the medical issues many in the transgender community face, and how best to provide a more supportive environment for the transgender community they serve.

While meeting with the CEO, doctor, nurses, and social workers at College Hospital, Sarah described her own personal story. She stressed the importance better patient outcomes as a result of interacting with trans-knowledgeable health care providers, as she experienced as a patient at Whitman-Walker Health in the Washington DC area. Sarah relayed that for many, including herself, she didn't have a primary care physician previously because of her fear of having to discuss her transgender history. She noted that for many who identify as trans, whether in rural or suburban areas of the U.S. there are few, if any, medical practitioners who focus on transgender health care. This likely leads to poorer outcomes.

She also related that for many in the transgender community, even if they have health insurance, their documentation may not accurately reflect the gender and name under which they live. This occurred to Sarah while waiting for her health insurance to catch up with her new legal name, thus leading to a series of mis-naming and mis-gendering while she sought emergency medical treatment at a local Northern Virginia hospital. She indicted that mis-gendering can cause additional and unnecessary stress to a trans patient while seeking medical services and can be prevented with an attuned staff and procedures in place.

The College Hospital staff also raised questions related to how best to provide affirming and safe rooming options for those who identify as transgender, while allaying any concerns from other patients regarding privacy issues, and at the same time, following existing HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) privacy regulations.

In her meetings with approximately 60 Saddleback College nursing students in two question and answer sessions, Sarah again addressed her personal journey as a trans woman, stressing that her story is hers alone. She explained that the trans patients that the students may encounter in their medical profession will come from

all along a spectrum. Some may have started a hormone regime appropriate to their inherent gender, while others will have not- for an assortment of reasons. Some will have completed some, all, or none of the gender affirming surgeries, again, for an assortment of reasons.

Often, financial resources may limit a person's options. Sarah shared that job, and other forms, of discrimination, have led to a decrease in financial resources for many in the transgender community, thus preventing or slowing a patient from seeking the appropriate medical and mental health care needed.

The students had an array of questions addressing a wide range of topics with a common theme of how best can they provide more affirming and knowledgeable care to the trans community. Sarah noted that becoming more knowledgeable of transgender issues is critical to improved patient outcomes, and directed them to two recent reports: "Creating Equal Access to Quality Health Care for Transgender Patients" by Lambda Legal and the Human Rights Campaign, and the American Psychology Association's December 2015 report "Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and non-Conforming People".

Sarah also touched on the need for additional and expanded surveys beyond the recent National Center for Transgender Equality's 2015 survey to more extensively capture how many people identify as transgender in the U.S., and what their physical and mental health experiences have been. Sadly, Sarah shared the sobering data from the survey that many in the community had emotional distress in the months prior to the survey or had thoughts of or had attempted suicide in numbers far greater than the US average

Sarah was happy to mix advocacy and relaxation with family on her west coast trip and found it energizing to know these two medically-related facilities are striving to provide better outcomes for the transgender community in southern California. Her hopes are that this type of advocacy to medical and teaching institutions also will expand here in the greater Washington D.C. region, as well.