


Commentary: Promoting a gender-affirming environment in research: implications for research nurses

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Gemma Williams

Research Fellow, Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK

The aim of this paper is to ‘start a conversation’ on improving trans¹ people’s inclusion in and engagement with health research. It does indeed start a conversation on how better to engage with trans people within health-based research, providing useful strategies based upon the limited literature available that examines trans experiences of engaging with such research. Specifically, it seeks to offer insight into how research nurses can promote a gender-affirming research environment. Within this literature, it is encouraging to see references to research conducted *by* trans people who are experts within health research, and the strategies outlined to promote a gender-affirming research environment are influenced by this research. The visibility of trans researchers within health research is vital given the barriers that have historically affected the trans community’s engagement with health research, as outlined in this paper.

The authors provide strategies and recommendations that include basic principles around improving knowledge of the relevant community, using appropriate language and including representatives of the community in study design. It includes a useful table providing more details of how these principles can be applied to the different stages of research, incorporating some of the ethical issues that may need to be considered around safety and support. These are all principles that are well established as best practice within health research (Jackson et al., 2020; Sacristán et al., 2016) and that research nurses are already engaged with given their remit and responsibilities (National Health Institute for Research, 2019). In demonstrating how research nurses can build on principles they are familiar with, the authors help to ‘demystify’ how to be trans inclusive.

Research nurses can be crucial in helping to foster greater trust in health-based research by abiding by the best practice principles outlined in this paper, which may help to increase trust and improve research engagement with the trans community. In order for research nurses to be equipped with the knowledge and understanding needed to facilitate gender-affirming research environments, they will need appropriate training and support as with any form of patient/public involvement in research. However, evidence suggests that research nurses often lack the organisational support they need to effectively carry out their duties (Rickard et al., 2011; Spilsbury et al., 2008). The authors do

Corresponding author:

Gemma Williams, Birmingham City University, Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences, Ravensbury building, Westbourne Rd, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 3TN UK.

Email: gemma.williams@bcu.ac.uk

not go into the implications of this, which is a limitation of this paper and an area which is deserving of recognition within the context of providing gender-affirming research environments. Research nurses' ability to be able to provide a gender-affirming research environment will be helped or hindered by overall workplace responses to LGBT+, and specifically trans, inclusion. Again this is a limitation of this paper, as these wider implications around LGBT+ organisational support are not covered by the authors.

Trans inclusive policies, general awareness about the trans community and how to show allyship within the workplace are still 'works in progress' for most organisations. Recent research indicates that a third of trans people have experienced discrimination or abuse in the workplace (TotalJobs, 2021). The environments where health research takes place must therefore also be gender-affirming and inclusive, and the organisations that undertake, sponsor or fund such research should reflect this. It is important to highlight that a gender-affirming research environment must apply to the researchers too, which is an area that is not covered by this paper. It is unfortunate that trans research nurses are not mentioned by the authors, but this may be due to limitations in the research available on research nurses, in general.

The authors of this paper state that the recommendations can be viewed as a 'call to action' to the research community and I am fully here to support it as a cisgender ally. The paper provides useful recommendations for how research nurses can be more gender inclusive within their role, and will hopefully be used to start wider conversations that need to happen to create a gender-affirming research environment for everyone. Those of us that undertake health research should not only ask how we can better support the trans community to engage with research, but how we can better support trans *researchers* to undertake (and lead) research.

Notes

1. I use the term 'trans' throughout this commentary, as per the Stonewall definition: 'Trans' is an umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/glossary-terms> they were assigned at birth. Trans people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms, including (but not limited to) **transgender**, **non-binary**, or genderqueer. <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/what-does-trans-mean>

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Gemma Williams is a Research Fellow at Birmingham City University, focusing on gender inequality within health. She leads BCU's Gender Inclusion in Research Special Interest Group and is a cisgender ally.