

# Past and Future Challenges Associated with Standards of Care for Gender Transitioning Clients



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## KEYWORDS

- Standards of care • SOC 7 • World Professional Association for Transgender Health
- Gender dysphoria • Transsexual • Transgender • Gender nonconforming

## KEY POINTS

- WPATH has published seven versions (1979, 1980, 1981, 1990, 1998, 2001, and 2012) of Standards of Care (SOC), guidelines to provide safe and effective pathways for the health of transsexual, transgender, and gender nonconforming people. The general goal of psychotherapeutic, endocrine, or surgical therapy for gender transitioning clients is lasting personal comfort with their gendered selves to maximize overall psychological well-being and self-fulfillment.
- The main challenges associated with Standards of Care for gender transitioning clients are to stay current with the evolving evidence-base and evolving models of clinical practice, to be adaptable and culturally competent globally, and to be useful not only for practitioners but also other interested parties.
- The SOC are updated regularly and version 8 is in progress.

## INTRODUCTION

The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) has produced seven versions of the Standards of Care (SOC) starting in 1979. Subsequent versions were published in 1980, 1981, 1990, 1998, 2001, and 2012. The SOC, also known as the Standards, are global guidelines to promote the health of transsexual, transgender, and gender nonconforming people and are used by providers, insurers, government bodies, and other stakeholders including consumers.

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Their development and use has not been without challenges. These have been external and internal; externally to keep up with the changing content of evidence-based medicine consistent with the human rights of clients, and internally to meet the challenges of adaptable ethical use in practice. Because this article is written primarily for mental health professionals, the emphasis is to give clinicians context for understanding why the SOC have been written in the first place, their evolution over time, and on those challenges of most importance to this group in practice.

This article defines a standard of care, describes their purpose in general, and then moves into an overview of the WPATH SOC. Past challenges in general and those specifically connected to mental health are described. Then the current general process and challenges therein in developing SOC 7 followed by specific challenges for mental health professionals using them in practice are explored. The article concludes by reviewing challenges moving forward into the eighth version.

## WHAT ARE THE STANDARDS OF CARE?

A standard of care is a diagnostic and treatment process that a clinician should follow for a certain type of patient, illness, or clinical circumstance. In legal terms, it determines the level at which the average, prudent provider in a given community would practice. It is how similarly qualified practitioners would have managed the patient's care under the same or similar circumstances. In a legal proceeding, the medical malpractice plaintiff must establish the appropriate standard of care and demonstrate that the standard of care has been breached.<sup>1</sup>

Because a standard of care establishes a common protocol that an average, prudent provider should follow in a given setting, it provides a framework that is used for legal purposes advocating on behalf of the patient. A standard of care also promotes the use of a common language. A standard of care has an aim to ensure that clients or patients receive adequate and appropriate assessment, care, and treatment of their condition. Finally, and probably most importantly, a standard of care protects the public from substandard and dangerous medical practices.<sup>2</sup>

Formed in 1979, WPATH is the oldest and only global professional organization solely devoted to transgender health. WPATH is an international, multidisciplinary, professional association whose mission is to promote evidence-based care, education, research, advocacy, public policy, and respect in transgender health. The vision of WPATH is to bring together diverse professionals dedicated to developing best practices and supportive policies worldwide that promote health, research, education, respect, dignity, and equality for transsexual, transgender, and gender nonconforming people in all cultural settings.<sup>3</sup>

WPATH has produced the SOC outlining the best treatment protocols for transsexual, transgender, and gender nonconforming people wanting to pursue medical transition since 1979. There have been seven versions of this document with the most recent being published in 2012.<sup>3-5</sup> The overall goal of the SOC is to provide clinical guidance for health professionals to assist transsexual, transgender, and gender nonconforming people with safe and effective pathways to achieving lasting personal comfort with their gendered selves, to maximize their overall health, psychological well-being, and self-fulfillment.<sup>3</sup> Although the SOC recognize that language is evolving and numerous terms are used to describe one's gender identity, three terms (transsexual, transgender, and gender nonconforming) are used consistently throughout the document to maximize the number of identities included. The guidelines are based on expert medical consensus and where possible, evidence-based medicine. Although the SOC aim to be global, the authors recognize that some of its applicability

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