

# Health Care of Sexual Minority Women

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## KEYWORDS

• Sexual minority women • Lesbians • Health promotion

## KEY POINTS

- Knowledge about the health care of sexual minority women has been slowly accumulating over the last 3 decades.
- Sexual minority women have been heard when they speak up about their identity and their need to be included in the health care system.
- Sexual minority women have been heard in their need to know how health for sexual minority women is different than that of other women.
- Activists have been successful in engaging with the government to encourage inclusion of questions about sexual identity/behaviors on state and federal health questionnaires.
- These data have provided valuable information and comparisons with other groups of women.

Knowledge about the health care of sexual minority women (SMW) has been slowly accumulating over the last 3 decades. Owing to societal changes, SMW have been heard when they speak up about their identity, their need to be included in the health care system, and their need to know how health for SMW is different than that of other women. Activists have been successful in engaging with the government to encourage inclusion of questions about sexual identity/behaviors on state and federal health questionnaires that have provided valuable information and comparisons with other groups of women (**Box 1** provides definitions of terms).

The Institute of Medicine report,<sup>1</sup> *The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People: Building a Foundation for Better Understanding*, was critical in raising awareness to the lack of data on health care and requesting the funding needed to support research. Several presentations and books are available for providers to read that may assist when caring for this population (**Boxes 2–4**). This article reviews existing information on the health care needs of SMW: (1) factors in seeking care in health care settings, (2) specific risk factors and health care problems of SMW, and (3) recommendations for caring for SMW.

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### Box 1 Definitions

- Sexual minority women—Lesbian, bisexual, or queer women.
- Lesbian—Women who identify as having primary sexual and loving relationships with women.
- Bisexual women—Women who identify as having sexual and loving relationships with both men and women.
- Women who have sex with women—Women who have sex with women and may identify themselves as lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual.

## FACTORS IN SEEKING CARE IN HEALTH CARE SETTINGS

### *The Patient–Provider Relationship*

Early studies focused on the relationship between SMW and health care providers, and found that lesbians had negative experiences in health care encounters, and that nurses and physicians held negative attitudes toward them. Lesbians also reported fear that the quality of care would be negatively affected if they disclosed their sexuality and were therefore hesitant to disclose.<sup>2,3</sup> More recent studies have found higher rates of disclosure to providers, a change that most likely reflects increased comfort of SMW and providers owing to societal changes that have increased the visibility and acceptability of SMW in society.<sup>4,5</sup> A recent study found that 90% of individuals would not refuse to respond to inquiries about sexual orientation in the emergency room, but 80% of clinicians would not ask because they thought that patients would be offended.<sup>6</sup> These data clarify that patients are comfortable sharing information about their sexual behaviors/identity, but providers need to know and be comfortable in asking about those items.

The rights of same sex partners/spouses in hospitals, emergency rooms, delivery rooms, nursing homes, and palliative care units have improved over the past 2 decades, but providers may need to question their institutional policies regarding these rights. SMW need to be encouraged to enact legal paperwork so that their partners will have the right to be their medical power of attorney and/or health care proxy if needed. It is particularly important for the sexual minority community to have up-to-date

### Box 2 Resources for clinicians

- Clunis DM, Green GE. *The Lesbian Parenting Book: a guide to creating families and raising children*. 2nd edition. New York: Seal Press; 2003.
- Eckstrand KL, Ehrenfield JM. *Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender healthcare: a clinical guide to prevention*. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing; 2016.
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