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NATIONAL news

DIAGNOSING DYKES

Government funding and the backing of a prestigious institution lend a sense of urgency to research on lesbian health by Gip Plaster

The silence about lesbian health is coming to an end—due in part to a new government-funded report issued by the Institute of Medicine, a nonprofit entity that is part of the National Academy of Sciences.

The study is receiving praise from many groups for finally putting the name of a major scientific organization behind the push to learn more about lesbian health issues.

"This is the most important document that's come out in relation to lesbian health in years," says Kathleen Oriel, a Madison, Wis., doctor and the president of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, a group of about 2,000 sexual minority physicians and others working in the field of medicine.

Governmental officials had asked researchers at the institute to investigate lesbian health. In response the institute established a committee, which recently issued its findings.

Then there's the issue of the health care barriers that lesbians sometimes encounter. The study notes that the lack of recognition of same-sex partners, as well as financial barriers, may play a role. It is also sometimes difficult to find lesbian or lesbian-friendly health care providers.

In addition to recommending public and private funding for more research, the report recommends that researchers routinely include questions about sexual orientation on their data-collection forms. It suggests more training for researchers on lesbian issues, and more conferences on issues related to lesbian health.

Feedback from the report has been positive, according to Dr. Ann Burgess, a psychiatric nurse specializing in victimology at the University of Pennsylvania who chaired the committee that issued the report.

"There's been a lot of good feedback. People are interested and want to do some research in the area," Burgess says. "Research would help



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The committee's study, funded by the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, identified three priorities for future research and made eight recommendations for improving the knowledge base on lesbian health.

According to the Institute of Medicine's committee, research is needed to better understand the physical and mental health status of lesbians, as well as to determine whether lesbians are at a higher—or lower—risk for certain diseases.

There is some suggestion that lesbians may be at a higher risk than the general population for breast cancer and alcoholism, but the report acknowledges that large gaps in knowledge remain.

It also says research is needed to get a clearer sense of how lesbian sexual orientation should be defined, and to better understand the diversity in the lesbian population.

not only the subpopulation of lesbian women but all women."

GLMA members, meanwhile, note the report underscores their belief that fear of discrimination may keep lesbians from seeking routine medical care.

GLMA's Dr. Jocelyn White, who practices in the Portland area, says: "Within the medical arena, lesbians have been an overlooked and under-studied population. This report's recommendations not only speak to that oversight, but will help guide the research community as it develops a comprehensive research agenda for lesbian health over the next decade."

Oriel adds: "As a physician and as an activist, the most important thing is that with time and perseverance, people will listen. Lesbian health activists since the 1970s have been saying these things. Our message can get across. It just takes incredible work and patience."

At least one study has already been funded. Tonda Hughes, a researcher at the University of Illinois, recently announced that she has received a four-year grant from the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. She will conduct the first federally funded study of lesbians' use of alcohol.

Sunday Services
10:00 a.m.

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