

If you are a lesbian, do you feel comfortable with your health care provider? Are you able to be out in your doctor's office, or do you feel you must walk into a closet to get decent health care? The concern of two Portland lesbians might lead to an easier way of finding lesbian-friendly health care in the Portland metropolitan area.

Erin Sexton accompanied a friend to a medical appointment and was stunned when her physician insisted the woman's sexual orientation was an insignificant factor in her health care and yelled at them. She knows now that "people ask their friends [about safe medical practitioners], but if you're new to town, it's hit or miss."

Miriam Volpin learned about the plight of "a lesbian diagnosed with cancer who moved out of the area because she didn't know of any resources locally where she could get help being out." Consulting a nationwide database to find any lesbian-friendly physicians around Portland, she found only one listing—one supportive physician in a community that boasts a large lesbian component.

Not that there aren't more, but it's not that easy to find such a health care provider. Most of them don't have the phrase "lesbian-friendly" tacked up on their walls.

Sexton works for the Hambleton Project, which serves lesbians with cancer and other life-threatening conditions. She and Volpin, a volunteer, have decided on a course of action to confront what both see as a serious lack of resource information for Portland-area lesbians seeking medical care.

FRIENDLY PHYSICIANS

Volunteers compiling lesbian health directory by Patricia L. MacAodha

The two women want to help create a directory similar to the one available through the Women's Therapy Project. This resource guide would provide information about traditional and alternative health care providers who offer a lesbian-friendly atmosphere to clients.

Barbara Turrill, a Portland-area therapist and member of the LCP board, heard about the project through a presentation by Sexton. She thought the idea made sense and became involved as a member of the steering committee. She especially is interested in how the project "will reflect accurately who's friendly and who's not friendly."

What does make a provider lesbian-friendly? How will the

will it be for a lesbian to pass that first level, only to discover her health care provider is intolerant of her choices or ways of expressing her sexuality?

Volpin also is concerned about lesbians who express gender ambiguity. How are they going to find doctors who understand the dilemma of a stone butch who has to undergo a vaginal exam? How does she go through this process with any kind of comfort when she doesn't even relate to that part of her body? These are only a few of the challenges facing the women who have committed to this project.

Adequate financial support is vital; so is finding enough interested volunteers to make it take off. Committees already exist to create a questionnaire, do outreach, develop marketing techniques, oversee distribution and identify the best software to do the job.

The time length estimated for pulling the whole project together and having the guide ready for publication is 18 months, but much depends on determining how it will be financed. Fund-raising ideas are in process, including a search for appropriate grant money.

Kristan Aspen, LCP program director, looks forward to this cooperative adventure. She suggests the best thing is to get started, "and if we don't end up with the money, we'll put it on hold until we get the money." □

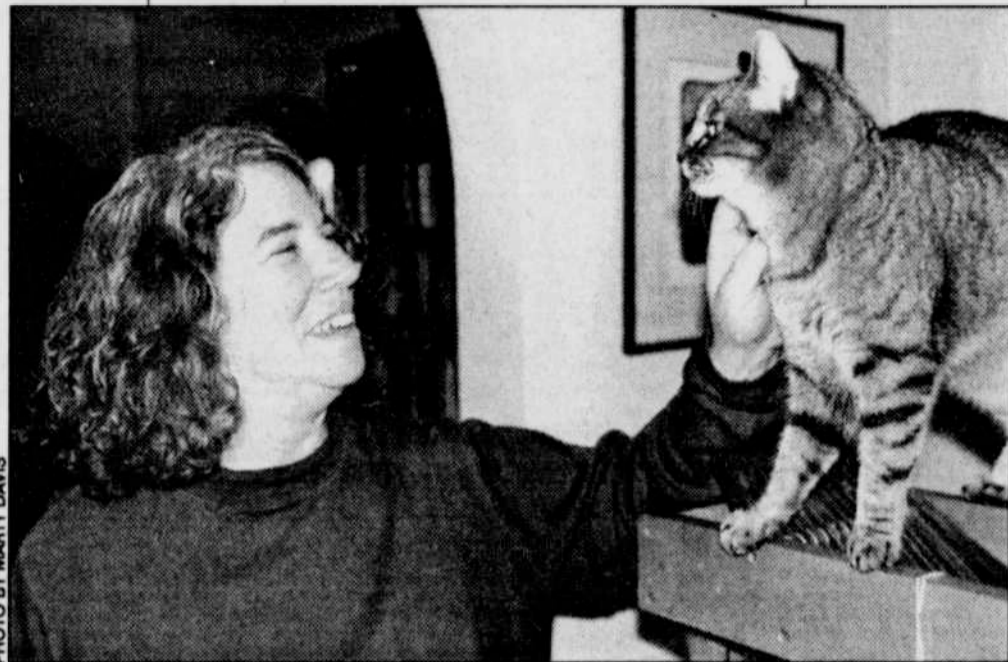


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

"Lesbians do not tend to their health needs because of a fear that they won't be in a safe place"

—Miriam Volpin

project address the variety of different health care needs and many kinds of lesbian identities for the women to be at ease with their providers?

Simply being able to tell one's doctor "I am a lesbian" or "My spouse is a woman" might be enough for some, but lesbians face a wider range of problems beyond this primary level of identification.

What about those who have piercings or other kinds of body ornamentation? How hard

"Lesbians do not tend to their health needs because of a fear that they won't be in a safe place," Volpin says. A number of women agree with her. Members of Hambleton and the Lesbian Community Project, intrigued by presentations made at board meetings, have agreed to provide resources and volunteers to help make the directory a reality.

Volunteers should contact Erin Sexton at 503-335-6591 or hambletonproject@yahoo.com. The next meeting will start 6:30 p.m. Feb. 20 in Room 329 at Portland State University's Smith Memorial Center, 1825 S.W. Broadway.

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