

Event 4378:

## **Reaching a Broader Client Base: How to Make Your Practice More Attractive to the GLBT Community**

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I am very pleased to have this opportunity to speak at this honorable meeting of the American Veterinary Medical Association. While there have been discussions of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender as part of previous Diversity Symposia, I believe that this may be the first presentation specifically on GLBT issues at our national meeting.

I also want to welcome you to the neighborhood where I have lived for 16 years, a diverse and vibrant neighborhood with shops, restaurants, and theatres representing a cross section of the DC experience.

I have had minimal formal training on the issues we are going to talk about but I do have a lifetime of personal experience as well as 20 plus years in various GLBT organizations. My first experience with Diversity was working in central St. Louis in 1969 in a summer education and recreational program for young teens, mostly African Americans. I learned more about life that summer than anyplace before or since.

I spent the next ten or so years of my life focusing on our profession. I had little time to be an activist but was able to observe clients and colleagues. In the early 1980's I began to join with GLBT groups and slowly became more active and knowledgeable.

During the presentation I am using the term GLBT community as the identifying term for all people who may be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, polyamorous etc. (I could go on but these various terms are not the focus of this presentation). I am using the term "community" here to encompass all of these people even though they may or may not technically be part of a "community".

I have three main objectives in my presentation: 1) is to identify several unique political and social factors that affect the GLBT community differently than all other special emphasis groups; 2) is to help identify office policies and atmosphere that will attract and retain LGBT clients; and 3) is to identify similar policies and atmosphere that will attract and retain high quality GLBT staff.

While I am normally reluctant to talk about differences between groups of people, I believe it is necessary to do so in this case in order that we have a common basis for discussion.

How is the GLBT community different than other groups?

The GLBT community is a hidden minority among the total population. There is no obvious identifier such as for some races and gender. There are no specific modes of dress that would identify a person as GLBT or exclude others from such identification. If you assume someone is

or is not GLBT, you are at risk of causing discomfort or insult whether you are correct or not. The first rule in dealing with all people (including those that may be GLBT) is not to make assumptions about their sexuality unless the person specifically identifies themselves with a 'label'. In most casual situations, 'labels' are not a factor. I will address this further in a few minutes.

A related factor to the "hidden minority" is the fact that LGBT people are part of every population, subpopulation, class (group) of people all over the world. There are LGBT blacks, whites, Native Americans, Asians, etc. There are LGBT Baptists, Lutherans, Hindu, theist, atheist, Wiccan, etc. There are LGBT people in every country; LGBT who are handicapped or learning disabled or any other group you may want to identify. They are even part of every extended family, part of every profession, even veterinarians. Indeed, it was the diversity among LGBT people that led to the adoption of the rainbow flag as a symbol of all of the parts of the broader community. The first rainbow flag representing GLBT diversity was created in 1978. The rainbow symbol has a long history representing diversity and inclusiveness, hope and yearning. The Biblical reference of the rainbow at the end of the flood of Noah is among the earliest references. The rainbow symbol is used by various other organizations, countries and companies today.

LGBT people as a group are not a protected class unless they are part of another protected class. Title 7 of the 1964 Civil Rights Act defined certain groups to be protected classes based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. In addition, persons with certain disabilities are protected in employment and public accommodations by the Americans with Disabilities Act. Other classes of people are protected by specific language in various other Federal laws. There are no Federal laws that prevent discrimination against GLBT people. Certain states, localities, organizations and companies have instituted bans on discrimination based on sexual orientation. They have done this because it is good for business and community relations. I think that these reasons are also valid for veterinary practices.

How do I make my practice more friendly to GLBT clients?

Most clients find your practice either by publicity or reputation/referral. Some may just notice your location and walk in. There are informal networks of GLBT people as well as many GLBT organizations and businesses including restaurants and bars. A GLBT person is more likely to talk to another GLBT person when s/he is seeking a veterinarian. Of course, you want a good reputation to be discussed. If they had an experience that they perceived as negative due to GLBT discrimination, you can be sure that it will be discussed.

Participate with any referral program or advertise in the local gay media. Most cities or regions have local GLBT newspapers. Business card type ads can keep your name out in the GLBT community. Participate or be a sponsor for community events. Here in DC, a local pet support organization has an annual fundraiser fun dog show. Several veterinarians sponsor prizes or have served as judges. This provides great publicity and good will to the hundreds of people who attend, many of who are not GLBT!

Have a written non-discrimination policy that you require all employees (include yourself) to follow. Discussion of this policy should be a mandatory part of employee training. No discriminatory behavior or language should be allowed anywhere in your practice. Things do

get overheard so if the policy is followed, there will not be any unfortunate loss of a GLBT client who is insulted by a being referred to by a negative term or glimpsing someone on your staff making fun of them with stereotypical body language or movements. POST this policy where it can be seen by all of your clients both to inform them and as a constant reminder to your staff.

As an example of suggested language, I have taken a paragraph from the Civil Rights Policy Statement at USDA. All employees and customers of USDA shall be free from reprisal or discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, marital or familial, political beliefs, parental status, [or] receipt of public assistance... The entire statement can be found at the USDA web page with the signature of Secretary Mike Johanns. I would suggest that you sign your statement also.

When your new GLBT client walks in your front door, they want a friendly environment. You can display posters or pictures of various types of families with their pets. You can display posters from non-profit LGBT or HIV/AIDS organizations. You can display support of local charitable events such as AIDS walk or Run for the Cure. You can have information and brochures about healthy pets, healthy people which is especially important to anyone who is at higher risk of catching a disease from their pet. Much of this literature was developed in response to the AIDS epidemic but safe pet practices are important to anyone with chronic diseases, immunocompromised, cancer treatment and other such reasons. All of these things may seem individually small but your LGBT client will notice and feel more welcomed.

How do I make my practice more friendly to GLBT colleagues and employees? If you have taken the steps above, you have made great progress in making your practice friendlier to your GLBT staff. If you show proper respect to your clients and your staff, you will have a clinic that is friendlier to GLBT people.

There is a significant factor that affects your GLBT staff differently. A Jan 23, 2004 GAO report listed 1,138 federal statutory provisions in which marital status is a factor in determining or receiving benefits, rights, and privileges. In a 2006 report by the Human Rights Campaign, it was estimated that only 81% remuneration to employees came as salary; the rest were benefits, about half of that health benefits. Therefore a person without a domestic partner receives less compensation. Even when partner health benefits are offered, they must be reported as taxable income. So employers should be aware that equal salaries do not necessarily equate to equal income.

I am pleased to report that during 2006-7, over 50% of fortune 500 companies now offer partnership benefits (not necessarily identical). Why are they doing this? Because it is good for business both in attracting and maintaining a high quality workforce and because there are people who will choose doing business with a GLBT friendly business if they had the choice.

Many of the general suggestions I have made today are applicable to other minority groups. Good business is good business. When you treat everyone fairly and equally then there will be few if any complaints of discrimination.

I hope that by the time of the AVMA meeting this July, that the AVMA Diversity Task Force has released its final report. I am quite confident that their report will be a positive and useful aid for veterinarians, students, academia, industry.

I am also pleased that out-going AVMA President Roger Mahr has resurrected and expanded on the philosophy I first read in a book by Dr. Calvin Schwabe, Veterinary Medicine and Human Health. Dr. Schwabe centered his philosophy on the “one medicine”. Now, Dr. Mahr and others have expanded this to “one world, one health, one medicine.” I hope no one will consider me presumptuous by adding to that: “one world, one people, one health, one medicine.”

#### Reference materials

Statement from the Lesbian and Gay Veterinary Medical Association to the AVMA Diversity Task Force, M.D. McElvaine (ed.), November, 2005.

Guidelines for Care of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Patients, Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, [www.glma.org](http://www.glma.org), 2006.

Wikipedia for information on GLBT history and references, [www.wikipedia.org/](http://www.wikipedia.org/)

Further references will be available from the speaker.

#### Special Thanks to:

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