

Introduction

Almost every lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or transsexual (LGBT) medical student must decide whether to "come out," that is, to disclose one's sexual orientation, gender identity, or both, during the residency application process. Though many people feel that a person's sexual orientation and gender identity should not be issues in the medical workplace, the borders between one's personal and professional life are often blurred, as anyone who has worked in a medical setting knows. This guide is based on discussions held in New York and San Francisco to help LGBT medical students decide whether to be out on their applications. The New York discussion, attended by forty-five people, was hosted by two organizations, New York Gay and Lesbian Physicians and Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists of New York. The smaller San Francisco discussion was held by the University of California, San Francisco, and was attended by nine people. Collectively the two discussions included physicians in Anesthesia, Emergency Medicine, Internal Medicine, Medicine/Pediatrics, Neurosurgery, Obstetrics and Gynecology, Pathology, Pediatrics, Psychiatry, Radiation Oncology, and Surgery. The discussions were largely based on subjective opinions and impressions, not on studies or other scientific data. Since the discussions were held in coastal cities with large LGBT populations, this subjectivity was even greater when discussing the climate for LGBT people in other settings, such as in smaller towns or in the Midwest and South.

Personal factors

In deciding whether to come out on applications, you must first decide what your priorities are. If your foremost goal is to be ranked highly by a program and you are concerned that being out may negatively impact your ranking, then being out may be too much of a risk for you. If, however, you have no interest in entering a program that won't accept you as an LGBT person, then being out is an easy way to screen out inhospitable programs. Being out in the residency application process allows you to project your pride and comfort with being LGBT. The more comfortable you are with yourself, the more confident you will appear as an applicant. Conversely, if you are not comfortable with your identity or orientation, your discomfort will come through as well. The residency application process is not the time to come out for the first time. Being out also frees you to collect information openly about whether a program is hospitable for LGBT people. Fortunately, there are many resources available to obtain information about how LGBT people fare in a particular residency program, but it can still be awkward to gather information while trying not to reveal your LGBT identity. Also, being out makes it less awkward to ask questions about issues that may impact your significant other.

How being out can affect your placement on rank lists

Residency programs look at several features in evaluating you as an applicant:

1. Academic ability

Programs want residents who can withstand the academic rigors of their training program and pass the Boards. While all programs want applicants with good academic qualifications, more competitive specialties in particular tend to rely more on measures of academic ability and often use grades, honors, and Board scores as cutoffs in offering interviews. Whether you are out on your application will have no effect on these "objective" measures.

2. Professionalism

Programs want to be sure you have the professional attributes that will allow you to work well as

part of their team. These attributes include your attendance and punctuality, reliability and thoroughness with work, and ability to interact well with patients and families. The program also wants to be sure you will work well with your future colleagues: other residents, attendings, hospital staff, and medical students. Programs also want to avoid people who will "rock the boat" during their residency. Your Dean's letter and letters of recommendation are the primary ways programs assess your professionalism, and your appearance and behavior on your interview day are also important measures. Overall, your LGBT identity should have little or no bearing on your professionalism, but a program's subjective impressions can easily be influenced by people's individual attitudes toward LGBT people. Some people may consider the earring you wear unprofessional or worry that as an LGBT person you will start making troublesome demands for benefits, others will see your comfort with your identity as a strong asset. Very broadly speaking, programs in the South and Midwest and in more competitive specialties tend to be more conservative.

3. Uniqueness

Attributes and activities that make you unique will help you to stand out from the many applicants screened by a residency program. Furthermore, some programs actively want to recruit people from minorities, including sexual minorities; this is particularly true in primary care specialties (Family Practice, Internal Medicine, and Pediatrics), which strive for the demographics of their residents to reflect the diversity of their patient population. Your uniqueness is demonstrated in your Dean's letter, your extracurricular activities, your personal statement, and your interview. Having significant LGBT-related activities or achievements on your curriculum vitae can definitely add to your uniqueness. These days, however, simply being an out LGBT person won't impress most programs. Also, don't overemphasize your uniqueness; programs want people who will bring something new to the program but at the same time will fit in well and not cause problems.

4. Commitment to the specialty

This will come across in your personal statement and interview and possibly in your activities and Dean's letter. For some people, being LGBT may contribute to an interest in a particular field, for instance, HIV medicine.

5. How likely you are to rank the program highly

A program is more likely to rank you lower if it feels you are unlikely to come to the program; a program located in an area that is inhospitable toward LGBT people may realize that an LGBT applicant is unlikely to rank them highly. Conversely, if a program knows that you have a reason to rank them highly, for example, a significant other who lives in that area, it is more likely to rank you more highly. Programs assess this primarily on your interview day.

Being out on your written application

The first step in applying for residency is completing the common application form. Since this form is distributed to all programs you apply to, coming out on the common application is an all-or-none decision. This can be awkward if you have LGBT-related activities you would like to highlight but are unsure whether you should be out to all the programs you are applying to. You need to weight the benefits of listing your unique activities against the risk that a program might view your being LGBT negatively. Listing potentially LGBT-related activities, e.g. the AIDS Ride, as a substitute for coming out is probably too subtle and vague of an approach. The Dean's letter is a written account of your grades, evaluations, and activities, prepared by your Dean's Office and sent to all programs. As with the common application form, if you don't want to come out to some programs, then you should not be out on your Dean's letter. Review your Dean's letter carefully to make sure you are comfortable with all aspects of the letter. Since you can send different personal statements to different programs, coming out in your personal statement is essentially the only way to reveal your LGBT identity to some but not all programs on your written application. You can also choose which letters of recommendation are sent to which program. All aspects of your application are potential topics of discussion in your interviews, so if you aren't comfortable discussing anything, don't include it on your application.

Being out in your interviews

Interviews can be the most stressful part of the application process, but also offer the best chance for you and programs to find out about each other. In general, if you have concerns that kept you from being out on your application, you probably shouldn't be out on your interviews for the same reasons. Do your research to decide ahead of time whether you want to come out in your interviews. If you wait until the interview day and rely on instinct or "gaydar" to identify people to approach with questions, you risk making a potentially embarrassing or even damaging mistake. Some interviewers make it clear that they themselves are LGBT through rainbow flags, pictures of their families, or open statements. Feel free to come out to them, but the information may not remain confidential. Interviewers are prohibited from asking about your age, marital status, number of children or intent to have children, or sexual orientation. These taboo topics nevertheless come up frequently in interviews, either directly or indirectly, and can create a particularly uncomfortable situation if you aren't out on your written application. Interviewers will pick up on efforts to evade their questions, and a direct refusal to answer a question will probably not be taken well. You should probably answer a direct question honestly, but it's not necessary to offer extra information if you don't feel comfortable doing so. Spending an extra day visiting a program can be extremely valuable. It lets you ask about many topics you might not want to bring up during the official interview day, such as workload, call schedules, benefits, conflict resolution, and LGBT climate. It also demonstrates to the residency director that you have a strong interest in the program.

Finding out whether a particular program is a good fit for you as an LGBT person

It's in a program's best interest to represent itself accurately. Misinformation and faulty expectations produce unhappy residents and, in turn, a bad reputation for the program. The best way to find out about the climate for LGBT people at a particular program is to ask an LGBT person in that program, or at least at that institution if you can't find someone in the program. Asking a non-LGBT person in the program is a potentially easier but less satisfactory alternative, simply because non-LGBT people are less likely to have an accurate assessment of the LGBT climate. It's obviously easiest to ask about the climate for LGBT people if you are out. Occasionally people can pick up your meaning if you ask vaguely whether a program is "open minded," but if you're not out, the interview day probably isn't the best time to collect information about the LGBT climate. If you aren't comfortable with asking a program directly to schedule you to meet with an LGBT resident, the GLMA membership directory is particularly useful to identify an initial LGBT contact. The AMSA LGBTPM residency survey may not cover your specialty of interest at a particular institution, but there is a good chance that someone in another department at that institution is listed. You can tap into existing networks by attending a meeting, asking a question over the listservs, or asking LGBT faculty members at your institution whether they know someone whom you could contact. Some programs have as part of their interview days a confidential question-and-answer sessions that do not affect ranking decisions. These are good opportunities to get the real scoop about a program. Questions about domestic partner benefits and housing available for LGBT couples and families should be addressed to an institution's Office of Housestaff Benefits or Graduate Medical Education. These offices normally do not communicate with residency programs about applicants.

Conclusion

There are many tangible benefits to being out during the residency application process, as well as potential disadvantages. Talk to friends, advisors, and other contacts to decide how comfortable you are with being out on your applications. Do your research about the specialty you are applying in and about specific programs. By carefully deciding whether and how to reveal your sexual orientation and by gathering information about residency programs, you will maximize your chances of being able to choose the residency that is the best fit for you.

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