

EMBRACING DIFFERENCE

Employers have a duty to support all staff, regardless of their sexual orientation. Jennifer Sprinks reports

'The single most important thing an organisation can do for lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans (LGBT) staff is help them to be themselves,' says Carol Baxter, head of equality and diversity at NHS Employers. 'If a person has to hide their sexuality or who they are, they cannot perform their best at work.'

Professor Baxter says it is important for healthcare organisations to create an open culture where staff feel safe disclosing their sexuality and confident that the organisation will take action to tackle discrimination.

HIV and sexual health charity the Terrence Higgins Trust offers support to many NHS organisations by sending advisers to train management and raise awareness about LGBT issues.

The charity's clinical director Jason Warriner says the health service has a long way to go to tackle homophobia and prejudice in the workplace. The nurse explains: 'We need more LGBT



Trust ranked 50th in Stonewall's top 100 list of gay-friendly employers in Britain. In addition to a joint LGBT network, which is made up of all the trusts in Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire, the trust is setting up its own

list, conducts surveys with all employees on and during their employment and when they leave the trust. If the surveys show a high proportion of LGBT staff leaving, the trust can examine the reasons why. The trust has also set up an LGBT network so staff can share their concerns and co-ordinate group events.

Networks

The trust's equality and diversity manager Jane Miller says the network offers LGBT staff a chance to support one another. 'It also gives them confidence that trust policies are trying to reflect their needs,' she adds.

RCN diversity and equality co-ordinator Wendy Irwin points out that under the Equalities Act 2010, organisations have a duty to protect the needs of LGBT staff. However, she believes that the focus on protecting trans employees is still weak.

'We need to build the capacity of organisations to support staff going through gender reassignment, particularly in preparing for their return to work,' she says.

While Ms Irwin recognises that progress has been made to support LGBT staff, she fears efforts could dwindle as a result of the financial pressures on the NHS. 'This agenda is so fundamental to patient care and staff wellbeing that it cannot fall by the wayside,' she says. 'This is when it most matters' **NS**

Jennifer Sprinks is a freelance journalist

WE NEED MORE LGBT STAFF IN SENIOR POSITIONS TO SEND A MESSAGE THAT THEY CAN GO FAR IN THE NHS

staff in senior positions to send out a positive message that they can go far in the NHS.'

To show that LGBT staff should be progressing in their careers, NHS Sefton has developed a monitoring form to record anonymous data about their employees' sexual orientation and gender at birth. The trust's equality and diversity lead Linda Douglas says it needs this form of accurate data to learn about gaps in people's career progression.

Last month, Hertfordshire Partnership NHS Foundation

equalities network group for gay and straight staff.

Executive nurse Oliver Shanley says the group helps address staff needs directly. 'This is what staff are telling us they would like,' he says.

The trust hopes the forum will take issues to its equalities steering group so that more effective solutions to problems can be achieved.

North East Ambulance Service NHS Trust in Newcastle upon Tyne, which also features on Stonewall's top 100 employers

RESOURCE FILE

Terrence Higgins Trust
www.tht.org.uk
Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans history month
www.lgbthistorymonth.org.uk