PRIDE prepares students to care with compassion

While the Supreme Court prepares to hear arguments this spring in Washington, D.C., regarding same-sex marriage, students and faculty at the UT Health Science Center San Antonio are well positioned to answer new health care-related questions and concerns for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities that may arise as a result.

That’s because nursing students are proud to be active in PRIDE, an interprofessional organization that provides resources to medically underserved gender and sexual minorities, including LGBTQ individuals. Nursing students have teamed with medical, dental and physician assistant studies students at the UT Health Science Center to fulfill the mission of PRIDE through community outreach, health education and research programs.
The group: 1.) provides a safe environment at the university for students, faculty and staff where they can support each other and learn about homophobia, transphobia and other oppressive ideologies and behaviors; 2.) educates the Health Science Center community on homophobia, gender identity and sexual orientation issues; and 3.) combats discrimination, harassment and violence that gender and sexual minorities may experience. The organization consists both of LGBTQ and their straight allies.

Peter Guarnero, RN, Ph.D., M.Sc., assistant professor in the School of Nursing, and Robert Esterl, M.D., professor of surgery in the School of Medicine, are the PRIDE faculty co-advisers.

“Oftentimes, health professionals don’t know how to approach gender and sexual minorities in the clinic,” Dr. Guarnero said. “Our goal is to offer educational programs and training to medical, nursing and other health professional students, faculty and staff to increase their sensitivity in working with gender and sexual minority patients by considering the myriad issues they may face when attempting to obtain health care.”

UT Health Science Center nursing student and PRIDE vice president of nursing Leo Benavides was instrumental in expanding the involvement of the School of Nursing and its students in learning about the LGBTQ community. The organization, currently co-led by Christopher Smith and Camille Spears and its 19 officers, convenes at monthly board meetings. Last fall, Benavides and medical student Eric Jay Gonzales co-presented at the first Safe Space training held in the School of Nursing. More than 60 students and faculty from various disciplines throughout campus attended.
“It is very exciting that the School of Nursing has been so receptive to the Safe Space trainings. Interest among students and faculty has grown and expanded into training that is integrated into some clinics. Our goal is to achieve Safe Space training for the entire School of Nursing student body. This would be one of the biggest accomplishments of the PRIDE organization. We are so thrilled to educate others on the LGBTQ community.”

The student-led Safe Space training sessions are held twice per semester and offer information, terminology, and guidelines for health care providers so they can ask the right questions and can be more culturally sensitive when treating LGBTQ patients. Research and case studies are also presented, as well as resources for caring for and treating patients. Safe Space 2.0: A Clinician’s Guide to LGBTQ Health, is an expansion of the Safe Space program and offers a more clinician-focused curriculum.

As a result of the successful training sessions and activities, Dr. Guarnerro said a directory of LGBTQ-welcoming health care providers has been created. In addition, a group of medical students identified the need for the creation of a clinic focused on providing free quality health care to the LGBTQ community. PRIDE representatives said they have witnessed the rapid development of this endeavor within the past year.
With the assistance of Dr. Guarnero, PRIDE members also developed a survey questionnaire to collect responses from several LGBTQ organizations. The goal is to identify and respond to pertinent health-related issues faced by the local LGBTQ communities.

PRIDE also sponsored the inaugural OUT for Health Summit last spring, a statewide summit that focused on caring for the 21st century LGBTQ community.

As part of the summit, and in partnership with the San Antonio Gender Association (SAGA), a trans panel of community members who identify themselves as being transgender, served on a panel and shared their experiences of interacting with the health care system. They provided a forum to help participants understand problems and issues such as the lack of health care services and competent care available to the LGBTQ community.

Students and faculty from all five schools at the university participated to create a more tolerant environment. The goal was to teach faculty and students how to interact with and treat LGBTQ students and patients. The next OUT for Health summit will be held Feb. 6 and 7 at the UT-Houston Health Science Center.

PRIDE members also participate in community events such as the PRIDE “Bigger than Texas” festival where they provide health screenings and first aid.

On campus, the organization provides
rainbow flag stickers and ally stickers that students can place on their identification badges so they can be easily identified as “safe” individuals for which the LGBTQ community can approach and confide in when needed.

“PRIDE has made huge strides in becoming present at the UT Health Science Center,” Benavides said. “Its impact on the School of Nursing has gained momentum over the past year. PRIDE hopes to use this momentum to engage students to participate in more events, whether they are community-service-, educational- or socially focused. We are always reminded about the importance of cultural competency and this is an excellent way to begin learning about the LGBT community culture,” he added.

“All in all, PRIDE helps to teach students and our future health care professionals how to be more understanding, tolerant, compassionate and caring toward all humanity,” Dr. Guarnero said.

“We want students to have successful health care career paths. PRIDE offers them vital tools toward achieving a full and well-rounded educational experience and professional development for which to achieve this in the 21st century. And we couldn’t be more proud.”

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