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RESEARCH REVIEW | ISSUE 255

■ Exploring Research Engagement and Priorities of Transgender and Gender Diverse Veterans

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ABSTRACT:

"In recent years, the U.S. Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has seen an increasing population of transgender and gender diverse (TGD) veterans accessing care. Approximately 139 per 100,000 VHA users had a gender identity disorder diagnosis documented in 2018 compared to 32.9 per 100,000 in 2013. Despite TGD patients being overrepresented within VHA, TGD veterans may distrust or face unique barriers with various aspects of the VHA, including health services research. Existing VHA health research focused on TGD populations is largely limited to secondary analyses of electronic health record data. Identifying strategies to enhance primary data collection is crucial for more deeply investigating health care challenges experienced by TGD veterans using VHA care. Additionally, describing health topics of importance for TGD veterans is important for making the research agenda more patient-centered. In this study, we offer veterans' recommendations for researchers working with underrepresented populations based on our findings."

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- Through semi-structured interviews with TGD veterans, this study explored the barriers and challenges around how the VA can engage transgender veterans to develop research around transgender health.
- Interviews were conducted with 30 TGD veterans, representing individuals from various racial, gender identity, sexual orientation, service branch, and service era categories.
- Participants voiced privacy concerns regarding themselves and other transgender and gender diverse individuals in research, particularly the risk of being unintentionally or intentionally "outed" after revealing their identity, leading to potential negative repercussions such as loss of benefits, safety issues, and increased stigma. Some also disclosed distrust in researchers' intentions.
- Interviewees suggested using recruitment strategies such as paid participation, outreach by TGD peers, and framing messaging around helping fellow transgender veterans to increase TGD research participation.
- TGD veteran participants identified mental health, suicide, and gender-affirming hormone therapy as understudied topics, highlighting the need for research focusing on these critical aspects of TGD veterans' well-being and healthcare.
- The findings of this study provide valuable insights for researchers and policymakers in designing inclusive and patient-centered research agendas, emphasizing the potential for effective engagement strategies, and underscoring the significance of diverse perspectives for advancing healthcare research and services.

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

For practice, this study informs efforts to promote the positive impact of research on advancing health and social progress for transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals to enhance engagement among TGD veterans, researchers should prioritize accessible and convenient research locations, consider providing compensation for participation, and utilize affirming VA staff for outreach. They should also prioritize researching mental health, suicide, and the effects of gender-affirming hormone therapy to understand critical issues faced by TGD individuals.

FOR POLICY

Findings from this study underscore the importance of including underrepresented subpopulations like TGD veterans in future health services research policies to ensure equitable and inclusive healthcare for all veterans. Policymakers should support and promote research efforts that aim to improve access to care for TGD veterans while also addressing the transphobic climate and discriminatory policies within healthcare and military institutions. This is crucial to foster inclusive research and increase TGD veterans' willingness to participate. Policymakers should also consider funding and supporting research that focuses on underrepresented subpopulations within the TGD community, such as transgender women of color, transgender men, and non-binary individuals.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study suggests that future research should focus on developing effective strategies to enhance research engagement and recruitment among TGD veterans, considering their unique needs and challenges. Researchers should explore innovative methods of reaching prospective participants, such as patient-driven recruitment through TGD veteran peers and LGBTQ+ Veteran Care Coordinators. Last, these interviewees felt that research should focus on understanding the implications of TGD health and well-being, including mental health, suicide rates, and the long-term effects of gender-affirming hormone therapy.

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