Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

Discrimination as a Social Determinant of Health in Transgender and Gender-Expansive Adolescents

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Travis, a 17-year-old transgender boy, was admitted to an inpatient general pediatrics service for pyelonephritis and was also found to have severe constipation and weight loss. Detailed history revealed avoidance of eating, drinking, or urinating during daytime hours to avoid bathroom use at school, precipitating his presentation. His case was complicated by discomfort with genitourinary examination and constipation therapies. Through this case, we explore discrimination as a root cause for health disparities and adverse outcomes among transgender and gender-expansive (TGE) youth. We discuss how clinician discomfort, lack of knowledge, and inability to provide trauma-informed care may exacerbate patients' gender dysphoria and contribute to negative experiences with the health care system. We also discuss the minority stress model as a framework to understand health disparities and describe the current federal- and state-level legal landscape with regard to TGE youth and their activities of daily living, including their access to school facilities, participation in athletics, and access to health care. We propose concrete action steps that hospital clinicians and health systems can take to increase access to care and improve health outcomes for TGE youth, with a focus on affirmation, family and clinician support for children, and advocacy.

Journal:

Hospital Pediatrics
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