LGBTI Health Alliance cautions that new Sex and Gender Standard remains problematic: ‘The lack of inclusivity in general population data collection reduces data integrity.’

On Tuesday, February 2nd, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released the 2016 Standard for Sex and Gender Variables. The 2016 Standard replaces the 1999 Sex standard. The Standard sets national classification categories used by government and government-funded projects for the collection of sex and gender information. The new Standard has been designed to ensure consistency with the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department Australian Government Guidelines on the Recognition of Sex and Gender.

"The National LGBTI Health Alliance congratulates the ABS for updating the Standard in a way that brings it into closer alignment with recognised international best practice in this area," said Executive Director Rebecca Reynolds. "In particular, we are pleased to see formal recognition of people who do not identify as women or men and some acknowledgement that people’s assigned sex categories do not necessarily reflect their gender identity."

In the Guidelines that accompany the Standard there is also an indication about how to avoid making assumptions about sex and gender by asking all people to classify themselves, when conducting face-to-face or telephone interviews.

Despite some beneficial changes, the new ABS Standard still does not reflect all of the Alliance’s recommendations for inclusive data collection with intersex people and with people of trans and/or non-binary experience. The new Standard states that further breakdown of the ‘Other’ category would be required 'when undertaking an in depth social study'.

Reynolds explained, "although the new Standard represents substantial progress in several key areas, we regret that it has not yet been possible for the ABS has to provide a comprehensive solution to address the concerns of our constituents. There is a misconception among some data collectors and researchers that recognising diverse populations of non-binary people as more than just a general 'Other' category reduces 'data integrity'. In fact, lack of inclusivity in general population data collection reduces data integrity. All data should be collected inclusively, not only those that involve in depth social study. Statistical solutions exist to ensure that data analysis can incorporate diversity within the 'Other' category. The Alliance routinely provides such advice to researchers, government, and the non-profit sector."
The new Standard also leaves the door open for some researchers to use 'intersex' as a third sex category, despite feedback from the Alliance and intersex member organisations that intersex should not be used as a third category and that intersex people may often consider themselves to be female or male.

The Alliance has similar concerns about the description in the 2016 Standard stating that 'a biological male may feel it may be dangerous to disclose their sex when they express and dress as a female'. As Reynolds noted, "this description in the Standard does not reflect an accurate understanding of how many people of trans experience categorise and understand themselves. The person being described is a woman and may also classify her sex as female, whether or not she has affirmed her gender through various hormonal or surgical medical interventions. She 'expresses' herself as a woman, so it is likely that she would prefer to be described using appropriately gendered language. Referring to her as 'their' and 'they' instead of as 'her' and 'she' here creates unnecessary ambiguity and fails to respect her gender as a woman. This kind of misgendering in a national standard is unfortunate and does not reflect best practice for data collection."

Reynolds stressed the need for further dialogue to ensure that Australian standards reflect an evidence-based best practice solution. "We are aware of evolving international understanding on how to collect data inclusively while respecting people's privacy concerns. In particular, it is important for the future revisions of the Standard to acknowledge that an 'M' or 'F' does not necessarily provide useful information in biomedical contexts. Emerging best practice is to ask for specific biomedical data such as hormonal levels or whether someone has functioning ovaries and/or testes, rather than making assumptions that go beyond the limits of assigned sex category data."

The Alliance has a history of assisting government to shape and improve policy. "We look forward to continued dialogue with the ABS and with our members," said Reynolds. "We look forward to continuing to represent our members at a national level on issues of inclusive and appropriate data collection in line with emerging international standards. Over the coming weeks, we will continue to consult with our members on this important topic."

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Resource:

Original media release from the ABS
‘ABS releases Standard for Sex and Gender Variables’