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Contents

Lived Experiences of Transgender and Nonbinary People in the Perioperative Context: A Qualitative Study	3
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Lived Experiences of Transgender and Nonbinary People in the Perioperative Context: A Qualitative Study

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INTRODUCTION

Trans people have “gender identities and/or gender expressions [that] are not what is typically expected for the sex to which they were assigned at birth”.¹ Nonbinary people have “gender identities outside the gender binary” (i.e., gender identities other than man or woman).¹ Trans and nonbinary (TNB) people experience obstacles—historical, cultural, social, political, financial—including stigmatization, health inequities, and barriers to care in healthcare contexts.² In addition to the standard medical care any person may seek in their lifetime, some TNB people may also choose to medically transition with hormone therapy and/or gender-affirming surgery (GAS). We aimed to understand how TNB people experience perioperative care, and to use this information to gain insight into potential gaps in the education of perioperative care professionals.

METHODS

This qualitative study was based in phenomenology, a methodology that allowed us to explore a phenomenon, grounded in the worldview, vocabulary, and context-specific experience of the patients themselves.³ With institutional ethics approval, we sought to ask, “What are the lived experiences of TNB people in perioperative settings?” Eligibility criteria included people who had undergone any surgical procedure (GAS or otherwise) in Canada in the previous five years and identified as transgender or nonbinary at the time of surgery. Participants were recruited by word of mouth, primarily via posts on social media. One of the authors conducted semi-structured interviews over Zoom with each participant. Questions asked about participants’ (1) identities and background, (2) surgical experiences, from the decision to have surgery through to recovery, and (3) thoughts and feelings through the perioperative process. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed, and three researchers

from the team separately analyzed through a systematic process of open coding. These codes were then collated and grouped into themes.⁴ Throughout the analysis, researchers, some who identify as nonbinary, trans, and/or queer, set aside our own experiences and beliefs affecting our interpretation of participants' narratives. Member checking was performed by allowing participants to review a transcribed version of their interview.

RESULTS

Twenty-one participants were interviewed. Ten self-identified as male or trans men, three female or trans women, seven nonbinary/genderqueer, and one as transmasculine. Seventeen participants described undergoing GAS; other participants described surgeries unrelated to gender. Participants spoke extensively regarding their experiences accessing trans-competent healthcare, describing stress, lack of clarity, and feelings of vulnerability navigating the perioperative period. Systemic marginalization towards TNB people exacerbated these challenges. Some felt unable to participate fully in shared decision making, particularly regarding GAS, in fear of being denied access to care. While in hospital, participants described both positive and negative interactions with perioperative care professionals. Negative interactions centered on being misgendered by healthcare professionals. Several participants described a sense of depersonalization at the time of surgery, like an object on a "conveyor belt," rather than a person. However, many participants noted the sense of community and resiliency when meeting other TNB patients in the perioperative environment.

DISCUSSION

Early findings reveal there are challenges to address within both the perioperative setting and the healthcare system overall. The stress of wading through pre-surgical bureaucracy often stood in sharp contrast to the positive feelings participants had with deciding to seek GAS. The participants described the need for self-advocacy and resiliency when interacting with healthcare professionals who had a lack of experience with or negative attitude towards TNB people. The results highlight the need for healthcare professionals to receive education specific to working with TNB patients and providing safe and competent gender-affirming care throughout the perioperative context.

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