

# Has there ever been a better time to celebrate?

Although discrimination against lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the health service is becoming more unusual, there are many older people who remain vulnerable because of past fears

**W**e've just enjoyed the second LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans) History Month, are looking forward to protection against discrimination in services under the new Equality Bill, and by now can almost take for granted the demise of the hated Section 28 (which attempted to outlaw the 'promotion' of homosexuality) and the equalisation of the gay age of consent. What has most grabbed the headlines, however, as well as tugged the heartstrings, has been the introduction of civil partnerships for same sex couples.

For the first time in the UK, the privileges that have been the automatic right of any married couple – most poignantly the right to be automatically consulted about hospital treatment and care, and register a loved one's death – are enshrined in law for same-sex couples too. Older lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people, who once endured arrest, blackmail, incarceration or at the very least contempt, have more reason than most to celebrate.

Without wishing for one moment to rain on anyone's parade, however, it's important to put this most recent and celebrated achievement into perspective with regard to older LGB people; life-enhancing though it is, civil partnership will only benefit a minority of them. US research (Cross and Brookdale Center on Aging of Hunter College 1999), for example, has shown that 80 per cent of lesbians and gay men age as single people – double the figure for heterosexuals. There are as yet no comparable figures for the UK, but even if we use the US figures as a rough guide, we still have a sizeable majority for whom civil partnership will not have any relevance.

Now that's not to say older LGB people are lonely old folk – far from it indeed. As singledom is more the norm in older LGB communities, lesbians and gay men age somewhat more successfully in many respects: gender roles tend to be less rigid and friendship networks more developed, for example. The difficulties for older gay people tend to arise for a number of other

reasons and at particular times in their lives, which include:

- coping at times of crisis. Friendship networks of similar age peers are not always able to help when things go wrong – the times when most heterosexual older people have children or grandchildren to call upon. In fact, the same US research cited above found that 20 per cent of older LGBs had no one to call on in a time of difficulty – ten times more than the general older population. The net result is that they are much more reliant on professional services than their heterosexual counterparts
- feeling safe and comfortable when they are at their most vulnerable. The oft-heard claim of many care staff that 'we don't have any here' is due overwhelmingly to the fact that older lesbians, gay men and bisexuals do not feel secure and confident enough to 'come out' and so remain invisible. It is important to remember that 6 to 7 per cent of the population is lesbian or gay: that potentially means at least three people in a care home of 50 residents.

The pressing question is why these older people feel unable to be open and honest about their lives. In response, it's worth quoting Age Concern's first resource pack on meeting the needs of older LGB people *Opening Doors* (Smith and Calvert 2001): 'It is the organisation that needs to

Roger Fisher and Ronald Strank met when they worked as nurses on the same ward 40 years ago when homosexuality was still illegal. On December 21 last year, when civil partnerships came into force, the couple held a ceremony, ensuring some security for their old age

"come out" as gay or lesbian friendly rather than depending upon clients to "come out" in order to get their needs met.'

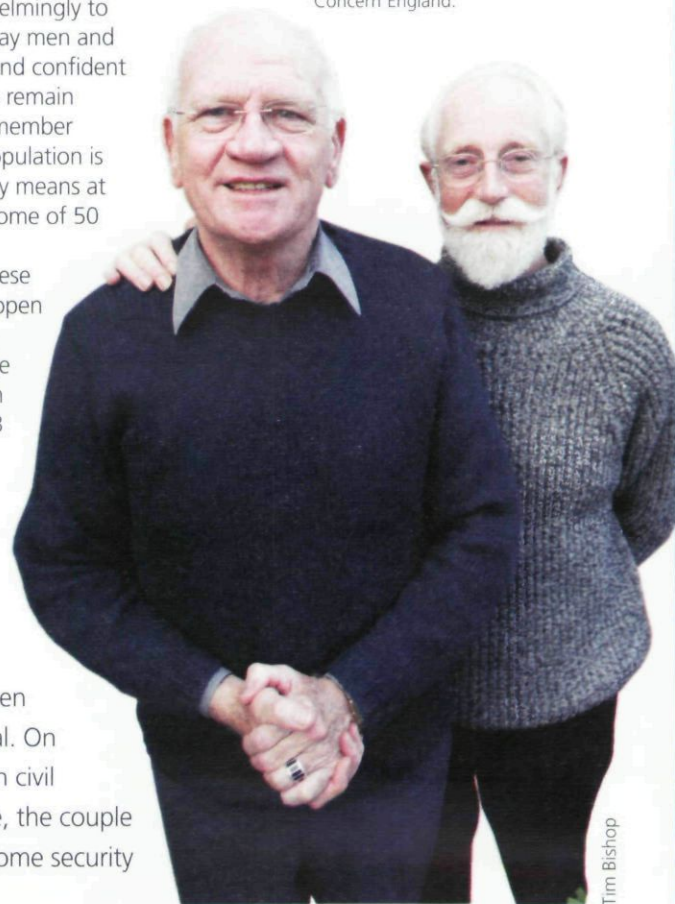
In other words, given the hostile social climate in which today's older LGB people have lived much of their lives, they need to feel absolutely convinced of an atmosphere of positive acceptance before feeling able to be a 'whole person', with a unique set of experiences and needs while in your care.

In direct response to these issues, Age Concern England will shortly be launching a new resource pack on meeting the needs of older lesbians, gay men and bisexuals living in care homes and extra-care housing. Much of the good practice advice it contains will also be of relevance to professionals working in other settings such as hospitals. Contact [openingdoors@ace.org.uk](mailto:openingdoors@ace.org.uk) or check out [www.ace.org.uk/openingdoors](http://www.ace.org.uk/openingdoors) for further details ■

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#### References

- Cross P, Brookdale Center on Aging of Hunter College (1999) *Housing for Elderly Gays and Lesbians in New York City*. New York, New York.
- Smith A, Calvert J (2001) *Opening Doors – Working with older lesbians and gay men*. London, Age Concern England.



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