

'We've got an awful long way to go': sexuality, language and representation in older adults' care homes in Wales

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Background & purpose:

While sexuality is widely recognized as an integral aspect of health and wellbeing throughout the lifecourse, older people are often assumed to be asexual and lacking sexual desires (Doll, 2012). In parallel, older people are frequently presumed to be heterosexual, which can neglect differences in sexual identity. Completed 2013, this research focused on the provision of care services to older lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people in Wales. The research was guided by the question, 'How are the sexual identities and relationships of older LGB residents perceived and supported in residential care environments in Wales?' This presentation attends to the ways in which older people's sexualities are represented by care staff and managers – the ways in which dominant knowledge about residents' sexual lives are reproduced in care environments.

Methods:

Mixed methods were used to gather staff perspectives from across Wales —1) self-completed questionnaires (121 respondents), and 2) focus groups with care staff and managers (5 groups) from 32 organizations providing residential and nursing services to older adults. Organizations were recruited through random sampling.

Results:

Qualitative findings indicate that care staff and managers discuss residents' sexual lives in limiting ways, including: - discussion of dementia and sexuality as problematic and risk-laden; LGB identities as separate to individual needs; and, care homes as (hetero)sexualised spaces.

Conclusions and implications:

Care staff need to be supported to a) increase their attentiveness to residents' sexual biographies, including LGB residents, and b) continually redress the construction of care homes as heteronormative environments. As advocates for older people's human rights, social workers have a fundamental role in promoting wider recognition of residents' sexual lives in care environments.

Doll, G.A. (2012). *Sexuality & Long-Term Care: understanding and supporting the needs of older adults*. Baltimore: Health Professions Press. Keywords: Heteronormativity, sexuality, older adults, care homes