

The Rainbow NHS Badge

DISCUSSION

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ABSTRACT

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The Rainbow NHS Badge began as a conversation amongst friends and has grown into a project spreading through the NHS. It is something I am massively proud to have been a part of, and one I have learnt a lot from in doing. This article is a review of why it was created, what it stands for, and the challenges ahead.

BACKGROUND

The Rainbow NHS Badge began as a conversation amongst friends and has grown into a project spreading through the NHS. It is something that I am massively proud to have been a part of, and one I have learnt a lot from in doing ... there are definitely some things I would do differently if I was starting from scratch now!

The original idea was simple: a strong visual symbol to say to LGBTQ+ people accessing NHS healthcare that:

“I am a good person to talk to about LGBTQ+ issues, and I will do my best to help you if you need it.”

In the two years since the project was launched, we’ve heard so many stories from people wearing the badge about how it has helped to start conversations, including some where LGBTQ+ people came out to someone for the first time in their lives, that otherwise might not have happened.

Combining the NHS logo with the six-stripped Pride flag, both strong visual symbols with a huge amount of history and meaning behind them, the badges are intended to send a signal to anyone who sees them that the wearer is someone who is aware of the health issues and challenges LGBTQ+ people can face in the NHS, but also that they will then act as an advocate for that person if needed.

In late 2017, the badges started out as a guerrilla project, with 300 prototype badges created and distributed to people working in the NHS across the whole UK, generating a lot of discussion on social media. Those wearing the badges said that they had an almost immediate impact, as people started to see and comment on them, which gave us the impetus to develop the project further.

Why are rainbow badges, or lanyards, needed in the NHS at all?

Making sure LGBTQ+ people can safely access healthcare is important, because healthcare outcomes in general are often worse for LGBTQ+ people. (1) NHS staff are often not aware that LGBTQ+ people can have specific health requirements or can be dismissive of them.(1)

Poorer health outcomes are particularly evident in terms of mental health, with LGBTQ+ people in general having significantly higher rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm and attempted suicide than the population in general; this risk rises higher for particular groups, including trans people, and LGBTQ+ people who are Black or from an ethnic minority. (1)

Data from Stonewall demonstrates one in seven LGBTQ+ people in the UK would be wary of seeking NHS care because they would be concerned they would experience discrimination. Looking specifically at attitudes towards LGBTQ+ patients and colleagues by NHS staff, despite a quarter of a century of improving social

and legal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people in the UK, Stonewall demonstrated that significant negative ideas and opinions about LGBTQ+ people persist amongst NHS staff. Almost a quarter of LGBTQ+ people report experiencing or witnessing NHS staff making negative remarks about LGBTQ+ people, and one in eight report experiencing discrimination as a result of their sexuality or gender identity. (1)

We knew that a badge alone was never going to be the solution to these problems by itself, but we hoped that it could be part of that solution. We knew the badges had to have substance behind them, so we developed the model for the badges into a pilot at Evelina London Children’s Hospital, which launched in October 2018. This emphasised that choosing to wear a badge was a choice, with a responsibility involved in wearing it, and that staff who chose to do so had to have an understanding of why a project like this was needed. Staff are asked to sign a pledge affirming this, indicating they understand the importance of being someone an LGBTQ+ person can be confident they can trust.

The response to the pilot was hugely positive, from staff, patients and families. In February 2019, we launched the project across the whole NHS, offering a toolkit to other Trusts and NHS organisations who wanted to launch the project, with an emphasis that this should be ideally led by local Equality, Diversity and Inclusion teams, to integrate it into each Trust’s own pre-existing approaches to supporting LGBTQ+ patients.

Even though we knew from the early response to the project how popular an idea it could be, we have been overwhelmed by the scale of the enthusiastic demand for the badges. In the last two years, the project has been launched by an overwhelming majority of NHS Trusts in England (70% at the time of writing in October 2020), as well as a significant number of other NHS organisations and GP practices. Similar projects are being looked at in the other UK nations.

Huge numbers of people have chosen to pledge to wear a badge, the majority of them staff members who are not themselves LGBTQ+. The next phase of the project will concentrate on making sure that the principles behind the project are maintained, and then look to build further on the project’s success, particularly looking at how allies can continue to help support LGBTQ+ people, and what Trusts can do beyond just having staff wear a badge to tackle the huge issues we know still exist. That work will be done as the project integrates with the NHS England LGBTQ+ Advisor’s office, with an ambitious plan for 2021 that you will hopefully be hearing about soon.

There are still many challenges

2020 saw the Pride flag being co-opted as part of a more general “thank you NHS rainbow” during the coronavirus pandemic’s first wave, meaning that LGBTQ+ people started to doubt its presence as a sign of understanding, inclusion and safety for them. While the

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rainbow has long been a positive symbol of hope in the face of adversity, the Pride flag is a symbol which represents strength, solidarity, protest, pride and safety for LGBTQ+ people. Where the Pride flag has been appropriated to be used in a more generic and general way, we have a responsibility to emphasise that using the Pride flag needs to come with a meaningful commitment to supporting LGBTQ+ people and rights. While there is plenty of room for the rainbow and the Pride flag to co-exist within the NHS, making the distinction between them is vital.

Although there have been significant improvements for LGBTQ+ people's rights as a whole over the last 40 years, trans people's rights in particular continue to need to be advocated and fought for, against a backdrop of increasingly toxic social and media rhetoric in the UK about trans people, often rooted in ignorance and bigotry.

And, across the world, we are reminded both that there are members of the LGBTQ+ family who are yet to achieve rights that will keep them safe from harm but also that rights once won can be rolled back, emphasised for example by the terrifying introduction in Poland of "LGBTQ+-free zones", or the nomination to the US Supreme Court of a Justice who has supported anti-LGBTQ+ groups advocating for a rollback of laws protecting LGBTQ+ people.

Wearing a rainbow NHS badge by itself doesn't solve all of the problems that LGBTQ+ people still face, within the NHS, in the UK, and across the world. What it hopefully does to is send a strong signal to LGBTQ+ people that whatever they are going through, there are people who will stand with them, who will understand their needs, who will advocate for them when they cannot do it alone, who will educate in the face of ignorance, and up with them against prejudice and bigotry.

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