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| Providing personal care to people with a disability |
| A guide for disability support workers and service providers |

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# Introduction

This guide is for disability service providers and support workers who provide support for people with a disability.

The purpose of this guide is to assist disability service providers and support workers to accommodate a person’s preference for a male or female support worker for personal care, where possible. Personal care can include tasks such as showering, dressing and toileting.

All people, including those with a disability have the right to feel safe and to be treated with dignity, particularly when they require assistance with personal care.

# Why considering the gender of support workers is important

In May 2015, the Parliamentary Inquiry into Abuse in Disability Services (the Inquiry) began its inquiry into why abuse in disability services is not reported or acted upon, and how abuse can be prevented.

The Inquiry heard:

* Women with a disability are more likely to experience abuse, compared with men with a disability and women without a disability.
* Women with intellectual disabilities and/or complex communication are at a higher risk of abuse.
* Women with a disability are more likely to be assaulted by men than by other women, including male intimate partners, family members or support workers.
* Disability services can address the increased risk of abuse faced by women with a disability by acknowledging and being responsive to the role of gender in preventing the abuse of people with a disability.
* Many people with a disability, especially women with a disability, and their families are concerned that they are not able to nominate a gender preference of the workers who provide them with personal care.
* Many women with a disability do not want personal care provided by male support workers because it makes them feel uncomfortable and/or unsafe.
* Providing gender-sensitive personal care can contribute to reducing the risk of abuse toward women with a disability and increasing women’s feelings of safety.
  + While this issue is especially important to women with a disability, it is critical that all people with a disability have access to disability services that take into account their individual needs and the right to choose who provides their personal care.

The Inquiry recommended the Victorian Government develop this guide to provide information and advice about the obligations of disability service providers to provide personal care, which take into account a person’s preference for a male or female worker.

Accommodating a person’s gender preference for a support worker is also important in meeting the objectives and principles of the *Disability Act* 2006 (Vic.). The *Disability Act* 2006 (Vic.) states disability services should:

* be flexible and responsive to the individual needs of persons with a disability
* maximise the choice and independence of persons with a disability
* be accountable for quality services and for the extent to which the rights of persons with a disability are promoted and protected in the provision of services
  + be provided in a manner that respects the privacy and dignity of persons accessing disability services.

# Providing gender-sensitive personal care to people with a disability

Support staff who work with a person with a disability to develop a support plan should:

* have a conversation with the person about personal care as early as possible, for example during the support planning process
* engage family members or an advocate in the conversation, if the person wants them involved
* use appropriate communication methods, devices and strategies, particularly for people who have a cognitive disability or complex communication
* inform the person they can nominate a preference for a male or female support worker to provide personal care, and that attempts will be made to meet their preference wherever possible (a person’s cultural or religious identity may influence their preference)
* encourage and assist the person to make decisions about the gender of support workers for personal care and inform the person that they have the right to change their preference by speaking with support staff
* document a person’s gender preference for support workers in their support plan to assist management with developing rosters that can accommodate the person’s preference (this should be updated each time a person changes their preference)
* document a person’s preferred course of action in situations where the gender preference cannot be accommodated, for example when regular staff are on leave and relief staff required. This may differ for routine/planned tasks, such as bathing, and unexpected or immediate tasks, such as the need for a change of clothing. The person may choose to wait for support with a routine task until their preference can be accommodated. The person should be informed of the timeframes for providing the support
* where the person has a cognitive disability, complex communication or has difficulty making a decision, a support worker of the same gender as the person should be available to provide personal care where possible and practicable
* update documentation if a person’s preference for personal care changes
  + ensure all support staff are aware of the person’s gender preference for support workers.

# Role of support workers

Support workers should:

* be aware of the gender preference for personal care of the person they are assisting
* be aware of the person’s preferred course of action when their gender preference cannot be met
* notify staff who are involved in support planning and documenting preferences if a person’s gender preference for personal care changes
  + monitor the safety and wellbeing of the person and report any concerns to the manager.

# Role of disability service providers

To meet a person’s gender preference for personal care, service providers should:

* establish a process for gathering information about gender preference from support staff and use this to plan and develop staff rosters
* refer to the documentation outlining gender preference when making changes to the roster. For example, changes to a roster may be made if staff take periods of leave and when relief staff are required
  + review records regularly to ensure that roster arrangements continue to meet the gender preference of people being provided with personal care.

There may be situations where a preference cannot be accommodated. In these instances:

* notify the person as soon as possible that their preference cannot be met and refer to the person’s plan to determine the preferred action in these situations
  + document any instances where preferences cannot be accommodated with an explanation.

If a person is unhappy or feels uncomfortable with the support received, they should be encouraged to let their service provider know how they feel. A family member, support person or advocate can assist to communicate concerns, if the person wants them involved.

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