

# Health Information Sheet



## Inclusive Language Guide: *Respecting people of intersex, trans and gender diverse experience*

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### 1 Introduction

#### What is inclusive language and why should we use it?

Language is inclusive when we use words in ways that demonstrate our respect for how people describe their own genders, bodies and relationships. It is important to show this respect even when we are describing people who are not present.

Researchers have found that how we are described by others has an enormous impact on our health and wellbeing, as well as on how likely we are to seek health care when necessary. Inclusive language improves the health of our families and communities.

#### Inclusive language is about...

- Welcoming all people to participate in and contribute to our families, schools, workplaces, communities and services.
- Giving all people the opportunity to make responsible health choices.
- Giving everyone a fair go.

### 2 Some Basic Terms

You might not be aware that you have already met intersex people, and trans and non-binary gender Australians, as they often look just like anyone else. Intersex Australians, and trans and non-binary gender people, come from all walks of life. They are our teachers, neighbours, family members and friends. They come from all religions and ethnicities. They may identify as any sexuality or prefer no sexuality label.

#### What is intersex and who are intersex people?

People are born with many different kinds of bodies. Although intersex people are often confused with trans people, the term intersex refers to a diversity of **physical** characteristics. Most intersex people identify simply as women or men. Intersex is an umbrella term that describes people who have natural variations that differ from conventional ideas about 'female' or 'male' bodies. These natural variations may include genital, chromosomal and a range of other physical characteristics.

In Australia and abroad, intersex is the term most widely preferred by such people. Although intersex people may use a variety of terms to describe themselves, it is generally considered rude for others to describe intersex people as 'hermaphrodites' or as having 'disorders of sex development'.

#### What is gender diversity and who are gender diverse people?

Australia is fortunate to have gender diversity that includes people who identify as agender (having no gender), as bigender (both a woman and a man) or as non-binary (neither woman nor man). Some non-binary people identify as genderqueer or as having shifting or fluid genders. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples use the term sistergirl (sometimes Yimpininni in the Tiwi Islands) to describe male-assigned people who live partly or fully as women. In some regions, sistergirls have unique societal roles.

## What is trans and who are trans people?

The term 'trans' means 'across from'. In some societies, people choose their own gender when they come of age and more than two genders are recognised. For example, the Bugis society of Sulawesi, Indonesia recognises five distinct genders. In societies that recognise more than two genders, people often use a variety of culturally and linguistically specific terms instead of 'trans'.

Currently in Australia, people are classified at birth as female or male. Female-classified children are raised as girls. Male-classified children are raised as boys. A female-classified person who identifies as a boy or man might describe himself as a trans man or simply as a man. Similarly, a woman classified as male might describe herself as a trans woman or simply as a woman. Some trans people identify trans as their gender. We use 'trans' in this document as a collective term to describe these diverse life experiences. The term trans (often written as trans\*) is also sometimes used as an umbrella term for anyone whose gender characteristics differ from their society's expectations. It is generally considered rude to assume that someone identifies as 'trans' based on their history or to call someone 'a trans', 'a transgender' or 'tranny'.

## What is misgendering?

Misgendering is a term for describing or addressing someone using language that does not match how that person identifies their own gender or body. Using inclusive language means not misgendering people.

## What is a pronoun and what do pronouns have to do with gender?

A noun is a word we use to describe a person, place, thing or idea. A pronoun is a word that we use instead of a noun, such as when we say 'you' instead of using someone's name. Some pronouns imply someone's gender, such as when we describe someone as 'she' or 'he'.

## How do we know which pronouns to use for intersex people, trans people and gender diverse people?

Most but not all intersex people and trans people who identify as women prefer being described as 'she'. Most but not all intersex people and trans people who identify as men prefer to be described as 'he'. Some people who identify as women or men may prefer to be described using only their first name instead of a gendered pronoun. We can ask people directly how they wish to be described. We can respect the dignity of each individual by respecting that person's wishes regarding use or non-use of pronouns. Ask privately whenever possible to reduce discomfort.

## Why can't we just avoid using pronouns for intersex people and trans people?

Intersex and trans people who identify as women or men usually notice and feel excluded when people avoid pronouns or use gender neutral language that does not recognise their gender. Using inclusive language means calling an intersex or trans woman 'she' and 'the woman' instead of calling her 'the person', 'he', 'it' or avoiding pronouns.

## Which pronouns should we use for people with non-binary genders?

People with non-binary genders often prefer non-binary pronouns such as 'they'. Some people with non-binary genders prefer to be described as 'zie'. Zie (pronounced zee) is an English pronoun used instead of 'she' or 'he' by some people who don't identify as women or men. When 'zie' is used, 'hir' (pronounced like the word 'here') is used instead of 'her' or 'his'. Using these words in a sentence, we would say "zie likes to ride hir bicycle to the library."

Some people with non-binary genders prefer to have 'she' and 'he' used interchangeably to signal that they do not fit as either women or men. Other people prefer to be described using only their first name. Using someone's first name instead of a pronoun, we would say "Terry cycles to Terry's corner grocer."

## What is pronoun cueing?

Pronoun cueing means using words and actions to send a 'cue' about someone's gender. Respectful pronoun cueing helps to make our communities and services more inclusive. Let's say we are talking to a co-worker about a trans woman who was classified as 'male' and who is often mistaken for a man due to her deep voice and her appearance. Using respectful pronoun cueing, we would say 'she was in the office today' or 'this woman is here to see you'. This promotes inclusion and reduces misgendering.

## 3 How can we use inclusive language...

### When talking about people's genders?

Using inclusive language means respecting people's genders even when they do not look or sound like we might expect from someone of that gender. Some people have limited resources to appear to others as the gender with which they identify. Some people may decline gender-affirming medical intervention due to religious, financial, medical or personal reasons.

We can respect people's genders regardless of their voices or bodies. We can check people's preferred pronouns directly with them rather than assuming. People who look like they identify as women or men might not identify in the way they appear. We can check privately whenever possible to reduce discomfort.

### When talking about people's relationships?

When talking about people's roles and relationships, we often use gendered language without realising it. We can use inclusive language by checking how people identify before using words that assume their gender, such as calling someone a mother or father or a girlfriend or boyfriend. A trans woman and her boyfriend might prefer to be described as a straight couple instead of as a same-gender couple; a trans man and his boyfriend would likely prefer to be described as a same-gender couple not a straight couple.

People who have non-binary genders may wish to be described using gender neutral language. We can use inclusive language by calling someone who identifies as agender a parent instead of a mother or father or a partner instead of a girlfriend or boyfriend. Some intersex, trans and gender diverse people are married. We can check how people describe their relationships before using non-marital words like 'partner'.

### When talking about people's pasts?

We all like to be recognised as who we are. An intersex or trans person's "real" name is the one that they prefer to use now. We can use inclusive language by keeping someone's former name, assigned sex and gender confidential unless we have their clear permission. When it is necessary to discuss someone's past, we can use names and pronouns that match how the person identifies now unless they request otherwise.

### When talking about people's bodies?

Most people find it disrespectful when others describe them based on their anatomy or medical history. Just as most of us prefer to be called a woman or a man and not be described by our bra size or prior vasectomy, we would call someone a trans woman or simply a woman instead of a 'male-to-female pre-op transsexual'. Think about how you would feel before asking a personal question about someone's genitals.

In medical contexts where such questions may be relevant, we can be aware that intersex men and trans men may identify as biologically male, just as intersex women and trans women may identify as biologically female. Intersex and trans people often describe their body parts in terms that match their gender identity instead of terms others might impose. Research shows that when health professionals misgender people's chests and genitals, this can be a major barrier to the provision of health services and lead to poorer health outcomes. We can ask which terms people prefer before discussing their bodies. When medically relevant, we can ask about people's sexual activities and behaviours without assuming based on anatomy.

## When talking about health issues and medical services?

We can use inclusive language by including intersex, trans and gender non-binary people when we discuss health issues and medical services. Terms like 'female' and 'male' are often less informative than we may think. For example, when a trans woman who identifies as female takes oestrogen, treating her as 'biologically' male is physiologically inappropriate: some lab test results affected by hormonal levels should be assessed against a standard female range. We can include intersex men and trans men who may get pregnant by saying "pregnant people" instead of "expectant mothers". This principle also applies to medical treatment. We can describe pap smears as "urogenital services" instead of as "women's services".

## On the phone?

We can check with callers before using gendered language such as Sir, Miss, mother or husband. A standard disclaimer can be used at the beginning of a call to explain that people's voices often do not match their genders and you are asking to ensure that all callers are treated respectfully.

## In person?

For face-to-face interactions, we can add options to existing forms that allow people to select preferred pronouns (including not using any pronoun), preferred title (including no title) and preferred name prior to each meeting. We can ensure that all staff use this written information to avoid the embarrassment that some people experience when others ask "what gender are you?" and similar questions in public spaces.

## By post or email?

We can check that our post contains a person's preferred gender language. "Mr" on post sent to a trans woman violates her privacy and could pose a risk to her physical safety. People might use email headers that have a different name and title than the one they prefer. We can use the name with which a person closes their email and not assume we can determine someone's gender without asking them directly.

## In a database?

Many databases use gender-restricted fields that make it difficult for intersex or trans and gender diverse people to participate or contribute. We can notice when databases are set up in gender-restrictive ways, such as when a system requires all people to select either male or female or when a system restricts the selection of item codes by gender. We can then identify ways to change the system to make it inclusive.

## When we hear disrespectful language or we unintentionally misgender someone?

Disrespectful language and misgendering can make it difficult for people to participate fully in our communities and services. We often misgender people without even noticing that we have done so, and we often do not realise how our words can exclude people. People who are misgendered by others often stay silent, even when the misgendering may upset them a great deal. Some people take longer than others to learn how to use inclusive language. We can politely and consistently model inclusive language or clarify a person's preferred language with others. By speaking up or modelling inclusive practice, we can make sure that all of us have a say in our communities and services.

If you misgender someone, apologise briefly and start using respectful gender language. In that moment, prolonged discussion about the misgendering is likely to make the person who was misgendered feel worse. After you leave the situation, you can reflect on how to be more inclusive in the future.

**The value of inclusive language is that it underpins respect for all people who belong to our diverse and wonderful human community.**

This Health Information Sheet was drafted by Y. Gavriel Ansara (Health Policy Officer) with input from Alliance Members. The Alliance gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Australian Department of Health and Ageing.