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ICB COMMENTARY

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Perspectives of a gay scientist: the importance of being visible

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I am a gay man and a budding immunologist. I am married to a man, and we have a 13-year-old dog called Igor. You may, or may not, find yourself wondering why I'm telling you this and revealing these details of my life to you. Well, these are the things that heterosexual cis-gendered people reveal to me all the time, whether directly or indirectly. When I chat with a colleague at work, they might tell me about a date they went on, their spouse, or how their children are doing at school. In short, every conversation we have carries details of our personal lives, our lived experiences, and our sexuality. However, for many LGBTQ+ people¹, we constantly monitor what we talk about and make split-second decisions about whether revealing our identity will put us in danger or will risk our livelihoods. As I'm sure you can imagine, it's exhausting. As a community, we are encouraged to fit into a mould of heteronormativity, where acting like heterosexual people is the goal. We are encouraged to act as the gender we were assigned at birth and be masculine if we're men and feminine if we're women. If we break out of these roles, then we attract labels such as "attention seeker," and people are more inclined to treat us as though we're only defined by our sexuality or gender. But why, I hear you ask, is this relevant to science or immunology? Let's get into it.

Imagine you go to a conference, and you attend a session with two speakers. One of them is a man who is wearing trousers and a shirt. He is cleanly shaven, in his 40s, and if you had to

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guess, you would assume that he was straight. We'll call him Carl. Carl tells you all about his favourite immune response. Once Carl is finished, the next speaker comes to the stage to talk about an opposing view on Carl's favourite immune response. The next speaker is called Andrew, and he is also in his 40s and clean shaven. Andrew is quite effeminate and wears nail varnish and make up. Both speakers describe innovative research which is rigorously performed. Despite all of this, there's a high probability that there will be people in the audience who assume that Andrew's research is less rigorous and that he's not a serious scientist because he doesn't conform to the heteronormative role expected by much of society. If their research was of equal interest to you, how would you respond to Carl and Andrew?

It is for this reason that we started an immunology seminar series as part of our organisation, The STEM Village. We platform LGBTQ+ immunologists to deliver talks on their research (Figure 1), but to the wider immunology community. We want to showcase the fantastic research from LGBTQ+ immunologists from around the world. By raising their profiles, we can help to increase visibility and essentially to normalise that people don't have to fit into a specific heteronormative mould to be brilliant scientists. People in the LGBTQ+ community tend to have fewer options to present their work, whether it is because they're not supported, or because they're less likely to put themselves forward for these opportunities ¹, so this provides those options. We also want to provide an opportunity for those who are considering careers in immunology, or academia as a whole, to see themselves represented, so that they are encouraged to pursue their career goals. There is also the issue of safety when presenting at online events such as these, and this can lead to the exclusion of people who are not able to be open about their identities. It is important to keep this in mind and give both speakers and attendees the opportunity to be present or attend anonymously.

For those LGBTQ+ people who are actively pursuing careers in academia, one of the key considerations is whether an environment is safe for them to be open about their identity ². As I'm sure you can imagine, this is challenging to determine. If you're interviewing for a role in your lab, or on a PhD course, one action (which my PhD supervisor did) is to wear a rainbow lanyard, or a rainbow pin badge. This signals to the prospective students or employees that you are an open and safe person to work with without anyone having to talk about it. Even though it's a seemingly small action, the use of rainbow lanyards is powerful for LGBTQ+ people. When I was doing my PhD at the University of Edinburgh, almost everyone in my department started to wear rainbow lanyards, and it made the department feel like the most open and safe environment that I had worked in.

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So, while it may not seem of importance or consequence to science, it is important to create safe and inclusive environments within academia, where LGBTQ+ students and employees feel comfortable to be open about their identities. As individuals, we can be kind and respectful towards our colleagues, and engage with their research in a meaningful way. Lab and institute heads can encourage initiatives such as rainbow lanyards to make the work environment more visibly open and inclusive. We can normalise the sharing of pronouns by adding them to our email signatures. Institutes should also ensure that they support initiatives such as network building, and that staff are required to take training, which focuses on how to support LGBTQ+ members of staff or students. Furthermore, accountability and transparency can help LGBTQ+ people feel genuinely protected against discrimination and harassment in the workplace. This gives people the security they need to feel safe, which, in turn, gives them more freedom to be creative and productive, and to advance their respective fields. More importantly though, making people feel included, visible, and safe in the workplace is the decent thing to do.

If you would like to find out more about The STEM Village, you can visit our website at www.thestemvillage.com or find us on Twitter @TheSTEMillage. The charity Pride in STEM established LGBTQ+ STEM Day and are a great place to find resources. You can find them at www.prideinstem.org or on Twitter @PrideinSTEM.

¹LGBTQ+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer. The + symbol represents those people who do not identify as heterosexual or the gender they were assigned at birth. The term queer was previously a slur, but many people in our community have reclaimed the terms to mean anyone who is not heterosexual or the gender that they were assigned at birth (cis-gender). However, it is important to note that many people are still offended by the term queer and it should be used with tact and sensitivity by those who do not identify as queer.

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Figure 1. In my cell culture laboratory, working with trypanosomes.



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