



26 August 2024

Southern African HIV Clinicians Society (SAHCS) Position Statement on the provision of care for adolescents with gender incongruence

Gender incongruence refers to a state when an individual's gender identification does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. According to the ICD 11, gender incongruence is not classified as a mental health disorder. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that a significant number of individuals with gender incongruence do encounter gender dysphoria, as delineated in the DSM 5. Gender dysphoria is the distressing psychological experience that occurs when there is a discrepancy between an individual's gender identity and the sex they were given at birth.

SAHCS, a reputable organisation in the field of infectious diseases in Southern Africa, advocates for high-quality, comprehensive, and evidence-based healthcare. Our aim involves developing guidelines for clinicians in Southern Africa, utilising rigorous processes that incorporate expert opinions and peer review.

In 2019, SAHCS was approached to facilitate the development of the first Gender-Affirming Healthcare (GAHC) guidelines for Southern Africa because of the extensive experience of the organisation in co-ordinating and managing guideline development. Due to the lack of expertise on GAHC within the organisation a wide spectrum of local experts outside of SAHCS comprised the guideline committee. In 2021, the first GAHC guidelines for Southern Africa was published under the umbrella of SAHCS, supported by the Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute (Wits RHI). Two versions were published - a GAHC condensed guideline¹ and a GAHC expanded guideline².

The GAHC guideline committee comprised 17 authors and 27 peer reviewers. As with all SAHCS guidelines, the guideline committee drew on available published evidence and expert opinions to develop the recommendations. It also drew on legal counsel from the Women's Legal Centre and the Centre for Child Law. The guideline was endorsed by various professional bodies and non-governmental organisations that provide care for trans and gender-diverse (TGD) individuals.

Since the publication of the guideline, there have been new developments regarding GAHC recommendations, including a 2024 review conducted by a team of medical professionals in the United Kingdom³ that raised concerns regarding the availability of gender-affirming treatment, particularly in relation to puberty blockers and hormone therapy for adolescents. In addition, the World Health Organization (WHO) is presently in the process of formulating technical guidelines for the health of TGD individuals. These guidelines will thoroughly examine scientific data, evaluate interventions, and provide updates to current recommendations.

Gender-Affirming Healthcare is clearly controversial, plagued largely by a paucity of evidence-based interventions. Fortunately for the field, this is a space where ongoing evidence is emerging, that will bring clarity to guide treating health care workers. The current SAHCS 2021 GAHC guidelines must be interpreted and implemented in that context. For now, SAHCS considers it prudent to allow international agencies and experts, including the WHO, to formulate their recommendations before re-engaging with local experts to review GAHC guideline recommendations to remain locally relevant and responsive.

SAHCS remains steadfast in its mission to provide evidence-based and expert-opinion guided tools for clinicians, including the development of guidelines in various fields.



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3. The Cass Review. Independent review of gender identity services for children and young people. Available at: [Final Report – Cass Review](#)