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CAMPUS NEWS

Gender-affirming surgeon speaks at Jacobs School LGBTQIA+ event



Keynote speaker Blair Peters, assistant professor at Oregon Health & Science University and a gender-affirming surgeon, discussed how medicine can have a "binary bias" and noted that gender isn't always binary. Photo: Sandra Kicman

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"I feel like many health care providers are not speaking up and I think awakening this population is going to be really pivotal in how the narrative shifts. You may not be trans or queer, but if you care about these people, be loud or just be open in supporting them."

Chloe Cottone, rising second-year medical student and co-president
OUTpatient

On May 23, the Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences held its inaugural LGBTQIA+ Education and Inclusivity in Health Care event. It had been in the planning stages since early in the semester, but gained importance, organizers say, in March, when a student club hosted an on-campus talk by a conservative pundit known for spreading anti-trans rhetoric.

News of that talk had led to protests and activities on campus by student groups that sought to push back against what many saw as a hate-filled narrative.

'Speak justice loud'

"As a queer person who's been out since high school, with a very supportive family and community, it was the first time in my life that I felt any sort of fear around my identity," said Chloe Cottone, a rising second-year medical student and co-president of OUTpatient, the LGBTQIA+ student group at the Jacobs School. "We wanted to respond but you can't take away the right of speech, even from those who spread hateful speech. But we can certainly speak justice loud."

By holding this inaugural event celebrating education and inclusivity, Cottone said OUTpatient — and the Jacobs School — were doing just that.

"Just by holding it, this event accomplishes a lot," she said. "In the face of the current political climate with all the anti-trans and anti-queer narratives and rhetoric going around, just putting it on in the face of all that is, I think, really powerful."

Cottone said it was a statement that hate-based narratives, such as the one the previous campus speaker was disseminating, weren't going to succeed in silencing either the UB community or the wider community. The half-day event, which included a keynote address, as well as workshops and an expert panel, was focused on education as a way to combat discrimination.

The event not only received funding from the Office of the Dean, but Allison Brashear, vice president for health sciences and Jacobs School dean, introduced the keynote speaker, Blair Peters. Funding was also provided by the school's Office of Inclusion and Cultural Enhancement and the Office of Biomedical Education.

"The fact that the dean spoke at our event was just really meaningful to us," Cottone said.

Inviting Peters (he, they) to speak was also absolutely intentional.

An assistant professor at Oregon Health & Science University with dual appointments in the Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery and the Department of Urology, Peters frequently lectures across the country regarding advocacy and policy change for all queer people. A double fellowship-trained plastic and reconstructive surgeon, they strive to be a strong queer voice in medicine and surgery, focusing on mentoring the future generation of gender-affirming surgeons.

"Dr. Peters is very loud in how much he supports trans patients, he has a huge social media presence (@queersurgeon) and he flies from state to state providing gender-affirming care," Cottone said. "I feel like many health care providers are not speaking up and I think awakening this population is going to be really pivotal in how the narrative shifts. You may not be trans or queer, but if you care about these people, be loud or just be open in supporting them."

In introducing Peters, Brashear talked about the unique role of health care providers and how the event served to remind attendees of the importance of solidarity and creating an inclusive atmosphere at the Jacobs School.

When Peters came to the podium, they surveyed the Dozoretz auditorium, where more than 100 students, faculty, staff and members of the public had gathered to hear the talk.



From left: Allison Brashear, vice president for health sciences and dean of the Jacobs School; Chloe Cottone, rising second-year medical student and co-president of OUPatient; and keynote speaker Blair Peters of Oregon Health & Science University. Photo: Sandra Kicman

'A lot of light in this room'

"I only graduated med school 10 years ago," they said, "and I couldn't even *fathom* an event like this on a medical school campus. It's really amazing to see how far we've come, especially with everything happening across the country. It can seem like dark times, but there's a lot of light in this room."

Despite the hundreds of anti-trans laws that have been proposed throughout the U.S., Peters noted polls consistently show the majority of Americans are supportive of trans people.

"Surgery is a tool," Peters told the audience. "All I do with surgery is match the patient's anatomy outside to their gender inside." But gender-affirming surgery is being used as a tool for fearmongering and propaganda, they added.

"Transgender kids do not get surgery," Peters said, directly refuting a key talking point for those trafficking in anti-trans rhetoric. They said the anti-trans laws that criminalize the use of puberty blockers are forcing young trans people to undergo surgery later.

While their own institution has a robust Transgender Health Program, Peters said there are states that would jail them for the work they are doing.

Peters noted that in 2022 there were 340 bills in state legislatures with some kind of ban on gender-affirming care; now there are 540. They noted people who want to be supportive of LGBTQ rights have conversations about not wanting to go to states like Texas and Florida, but cautioned that these states have substantial LGBTQIA+ populations. "We cannot abandon them," they said.

And while Peters is a faculty member in the OHSU School of Medicine, they pointed out that, unfortunately, it is the exception among academic institutions, rather than the rule.

"For the most part, trans care has been happening outside of academic medicine," Peters said. "If you don't integrate gender care into academic medicine, then there will never be enough providers."

Peters also said that while nearly every major medical organization has publicly stated that gender-affirming surgery constitutes necessary care, the major surgical organizations have been a conspicuous omission.

When it comes to gender-affirming care, there's no such thing as being "neutral," they said. "The state of neutrality where we do nothing is enabling the oppression," they said. As an activist, Peters talks often to medical school deans, program directors and those in leadership positions.

"What would having a queer surgeon mean?" they like to ask them.

"Trans people have always been here," Peters said. "This is just the first time we are choosing to look at it."

In closing, Peters looked out into the audience and said, simply: "I'm totally inspired by you."

Following their talk, Peters served on a panel with local experts for a discussion titled "Affirming the Right to Be." Panelists included:

- Dylan Stannard (he/him), paramedic and licensed physical therapist.
- Michaela Middleton (she/her), UB resident, Department of Emergency Medicine, Jacobs School.
- Andrew J. Freedman (he/him), a lawyer and diversity partner, Hodgson Russ LLP Attorneys.
- Nat Voos, MD '23 (he/they), Jacobs School alumnus.

The event began with three consecutive workshops: EMS Care for Transgender and Gender Diverse Patients; Words and Actions Matter: Rethinking the Hippocratic Oath; and Transgender Protections under Federal and State Law.