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AACE 25th Annual Scientific & Clinical Congress:

Transgender Research: The Role of Biology in Gender Identity Development

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Recent studies provide evidence that biology plays a role in transgender identity development, explained Stephen M. Rosenthal, MD, at the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists (AACE) 25th Annual Scientific & Clinical Congress, May 25-29, 2016 in Orlando, Florida.

"Compelling data now suggest that gender identity is not simply a psychosexual construct, but that it is influenced by biology, environmental, and cultural factors," explained Dr. Rosenthal, who is Professor of Pediatrics, Division of Pediatric Endocrinology, and Medical Director of the Child & Adolescent Gender Center at University of California in San Francisco. "The data that support a role of biology in gender identity development basically come from three different biomedical disciplines: from genetics, endocrinology, and brain studies."

The Genetics of Gender Identity

In a meta-analysis of twin studies, nearly 40% of identical twins were concordant for gender dysphoria in comparison with none of the non-identical twins.¹ "That is very striking evidence. The non-identical twins who, just like the kids who are identical twins, grew up with the same parents in the same households. The only difference, obviously, is that the identical twins essentially share the same DNA," Dr. Rosenthal said.



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"Why do we do this work? Because we know if people are not acknowledged in who they are, there is a tremendous amount of suffering and risk," Dr. Rosenthal said. He pointed to a 2015 study by Reisner et al showing that people who are transgender have a two to three-fold increased risk for internalizing disorders such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts.⁷

"Now does this mean that kids are currently depressed if they are transgender? I don't think so at all," Dr. Rosenthal said. "I think it's important to acknowledge the fact that there is still a tremendous amount of misunderstanding and transphobia in our cultures, and that obviously has an impact on how people feel."

He stressed that study of the biologic underpinning of gender identity is not intended to provide a "litmus test" of transgender, but rather to increase knowledge and understanding in the community at large, which may lead to increased acceptance a positive impact on quality of life for people who don't fit stereotype gender norms.

References

1. Heylens G, De Cuypere G, Zucker KJ, et al. Gender identity disorder in twins: a review of the case report literature. *J Sex Med.* 2012;9(3):751-757.

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