



GUIDANCE FOR CALL TAKERS

When voice and gender identity appear not to match

There will be occasions when an operator may either be unsure of the gender status of a caller or may inadvertently address the caller in the wrong gender. Although this 'misgendering' of a person may arise in any situation and can be upsetting, it is particularly so for transgender individuals; the impact can cause great embarrassment, for both parties.

Over recent years the number of transgender people (commonly called trans people) transitioning to live in the gender role that does not match their sex as registered at birth, has risen dramatically. It is now estimated that 1% of the population could potentially transition to the other gender role. It is therefore increasingly probable that 999 operators will encounter such folk.

The main issue is likely to be associated with trans women (those registered at birth as male now living as women). Many trans women are unable to raise the pitch of their voice and treatment with female hormones has no impact on this so, particularly on the phone, their voices will sound masculine. However, the voices of trans men (those registered as a female at birth now living as men) do respond to male hormone treatment and are more likely to have a pitch that matches their gender presentation.

Transgender people are often particularly sensitive to being misgendered when using the telephone. Likewise operators have no wish to cause any embarrassment. It is usually the case that the operator will form a strong mental perception of the gender status of the caller from the first few words spoken, and this will condition a gender-specific response which, in the case of a trans woman, may be inappropriate; the assumption may be that she is a man.

So how should an operator respond if the caller's gender is either not obvious or does not match any name/title given? If in doubt, the best response is to ask callers how they wish to be addressed. If the caller complains that a mistake has been made: "I said my name was Susan, why did you refer to me as 'sir'?" a polite response would be to apologise: "I am so sorry, I misheard you, should I address you as Susan or do you prefer Miss, Ms, Mrs...? Of course, in emergency situations, there isn't always time for such niceties, but inappropriate pronouns do cause stress, and may make an already difficult situation worse, thus lessening the chance of receiving accurate information.

If the caller is referring to another person for whom medical care is required, and says, for instance, "My Dad's collapsed", but then continues, "her name is Mary Baker", the operator should use female pronouns when asking any follow-up questions, "has she lost consciousness" for instance. Clearly the most important issue when taking a 999 call is to obtain all necessary information in the shortest possible time.

On the rare occasions when an ambulance may be called by a trans man who is about to give birth, male names, titles and pronouns should still be used in accordance with his gender status.