



February 6, 2026

Reflections on a Decade in Youth Gender Care from Dr. Kelsey

Like many parents of young children, I first learned about Family Tree Clinic when my (now) teen was a baby. Lindsey, Family Tree's Health Education Director, visited my St. Paul Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) class to help parents understand how to be our children's first sex educators. At the time, I was training as a family physician, and **I was in awe of the idea of a clinic that didn't just provide medical care, but also led such refreshingly sex-positive, comprehensive sexual health education.**

A year later, a friend forwarded me a Family Tree email seeking a new provider with the subject line, "***We're searching for a unicorn.***" It made me wonder whether Family Tree Clinic might just be the kind of place that could teach me to grow a sparkly horn.

When I joined the clinic team in 2016 during a year-long fellowship, Family Tree's hormone care program was still in its infancy. Something that's hard to imagine now. Dr. Eric, an adolescent medicine specialist, was seeing youth on a very limited basis. The waitlist was growing longer and longer, and some of the teens on that list seemed headed for crisis. I had the great luck as a medical student to learn from leaders at Boston Children's youth gender clinic, the first in the US. So when Eric invited me to spend part of my first year learning the nuts and bolts of youth gender care at Family Tree, I jumped at the opportunity.

At the time, there were only a small handful of providers managing puberty suppression medication in Minnesota. The Children's gender clinic did not yet exist. **These safe, effective, and reversible medications are prescribed to temporarily delay puberty, helping transgender and gender diverse youth alleviate feelings of dysphoria and distress from unwanted physical development.** Often described as a "pause button," they safely give young people and their families time to explore gender

identity and carefully consider future care options, and are proven to significantly improve mental health outcomes for youth.

From the outset, Family Tree Clinic was dedicated to offering this care because we heard loud and clear from our patients that it was needed. Providing gender affirming care was not a departure from our mission, but rather a continuation of our long legacy of patient-centered care. Our approach is, and always has been, grounded in trust, bodily autonomy, consent, and listening deeply to people about their own lives and health and affirming their experiences.

Fast forward ten years, and the broader health care world finally caught up to how Family Tree has been doing things. Although we were one of the very first to provide gender affirming care using an informed consent approach, this is now the standard of care. Before this time, there was a persistent reticence to *believe young people when they tell us who they are*, and a tendency to misuse our mental health colleagues as gatekeepers instead of clinicians. The old way of doing things imposed discriminatory and unnecessarily restrictive barriers that pathologized and stigmatized gender expansive people.

Against this backdrop, Family Tree's insistence - grounded in decades of medical research - that we fundamentally trust gender expansive youth, is powerful.

I can't begin to describe the joy that it's brought me to care for trans youth. As a clinician, it's a gift to care for people who have taken the time for self reflection. It's a gift to get to watch young people you've gotten to know so well grow and thrive.

There have been dramatic shifts in the landscape for trans youth over the past decade. Ten years ago, we were still in a sort of "golden age" of gender affirming care. **Our shared values of individual freedom in the U.S. helped youth-serving programs evolve toward truly individualized care that centers each person's unique needs and goals as they grow and change over time.** This differed from a traditional model in Europe that sent patients down a proscribed path.

We advanced new medications and cutting-edge innovations, bolstered by public advocacy and research dissemination, which led to much better insurance coverage for puberty suppression medications - dramatically increasing access to this essential care for those who need it.

When I assumed leadership of our youth gender care program at Family Tree in 2018, it was obvious that, once again, our youth waitlist was expanding. And despite plans for a new building, we'd never have enough rooms in our clinic to see everyone. So we onboarded two fellows for a year or two each, who helped us see more patients and meet the growing need. These fellows then went on to continue providing gender care elsewhere in Minnesota.

Recognizing the demand, we developed a year-long curriculum to train our entire provider team in providing gender care for older teens. This enabled our providers, already experts in adult gender care, to broaden their scope and see more patients.

Unfortunately, just as we were settling into our new clinic in Minneapolis around 2019, the so-called "golden age" truly began to end. [The dramatic uptick in proposed legislation around the country in recent years seeking to restrict trans folks from full inclusion in public life was growing into a flood.](#) For the first time, I heard officials in the highest levels of government call my job "child abuse."

I am a grown up and a doctor. I can confidentially trust in the decades of research, best practice, and most importantly, the witness to my patients' beautiful lives. Such commentary doesn't hurt me. But even in Minnesota, where we have some of the country's strongest legal protections for trans youth and their providers, these attacks are taking a toll. **The relentless creep of youth gender care bans, sports bans, and just living-your-life bans targeting trans people takes its toll on our youth. As a doctor who has dedicated my life to caring for youth, this is unacceptable.**

When trans youth, like all youth, receive the care and support they need and deserve, they thrive. What harms them is not gender affirming care. What harms them is the wave of disinformation, hostile legislation, scapegoating from those in power, and anti-trans rhetoric designed to erase their humanity.

As the care bans rolled out, especially when Iowa's went into effect in 2023, Family Tree opened its doors wider. We further expanded the scope of our provider team. The addition of our second Dr. Erik was well-timed, and from 2020-2025, we were able to welcome the largest number of patients traveling from out of state for gender care of any clinic in Minnesota. **Last year, we saw patients travel from 17 states to receive care at Family Tree.**

[In 2023 we also launched the Midwest Trans Health Education Network \(or "MTHEN"\).](#) **Through MTHEN, we are training clinicians across the upper Midwest to provide excellent gender care to people in their home communities, particularly rural areas, so that people don't have to travel so far to receive care.** So far, we've trained over 125 providers, each with their own patient panel. We approach our work from a place of abundance, and we are better when we work in alignment with other providers across the region.

Threats against trans communities are increasingly moving to the federal stage. As the current administration seeks to restrict care even further, Minnesota's clinicians have been working together across systems to ensure our patients will continue to receive care. **Starting from the handful of clinicians with expertise in puberty suppression when I started at Family Tree, there are now 40+ in Minnesota, many of whom trained with our team.**

In the face of these federal restrictions, which are part of a larger, coordinated attack against gender affirming care and trans people themselves, we will continue to be nimble. And we will continue to be here for you.

Though some clinics and clinicians in Minnesota are specifically targeted, there are so many of us now spread across systems and practice types. We are tenacious and dedicated. **We will continue to provide life-saving, high quality, evidence based care that is supported by every major medical association in this country.** We will continue to be here for our patients, and we will never shy away from the opportunity to do the right thing.

As I step away from my clinical role at Family Tree Clinic this month, I know our patients are in incredibly good hands. Please know that I won't be that far away, as we collaborate to bring MTHEN training in youth and adult gender care to clinicians around the region.

As for me, I will continue to provide full spectrum, all ages gender care through my role in the Family Medicine Department at the U and ever grateful for my years at Family Tree Clinic.

Onward with love,
Dr. Kelsey

