Sexual problems encountered in general practice

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The prevalence of sexual problems among general practice attenders was investigated by interviewing a random selection of 60 men and women who were waiting to see their doctor, and asking them to complete a questionnaire. A substantial number were found to experience sexual problems. In spite of this, practically all of the men professed satisfaction with their current sexual relationship. The women were rather less satisfied.

Despite growing waiting lists for sex therapy clinics, only a very small number of people visit their general practitioner to complain of a sexual problem. Is this because sexual problems are rare, or because those with such a problem do not discuss it with their GP? The authors set out to answer this question by interviewing a random selection of 60 people, 30 men and 30 women, who were about to see their doctor in two general practice waiting rooms in inner London and asking them to complete a questionnaire. The participants had to be between 18 years and 50 years and currently involved in a sexual relationship. It is important to stress that those who took part had not attended the surgery with sexual difficulties.

The investigation was carried out over a six month period. As it has been estimated that over 40 per cent of those registered with a GP visit the surgery in that period of time,[1] the sample should have been fairly representative of each practice. One of the surgeries was situated in a council estate, whereas the catchment area of the other included a substantial number of home owners. The occupations of those who took part ranged from unskilled manual to professional/managerial work. Eighteen men and ten women had had or were currently engaged in further education or training. Of these, five men and three women had obtained a university degree. The average age of the men and the women respectively was 31 years and 29 years. Just less than half of the sample were married (13 men and 12 women). The rest were cohabiting (seven men and ten women) or living apart from their partner (ten men and eight women). The average length of relationship for both men and women was six years.

A female psychologist carried out the interviews, which lasted approximately half an hour. Only one man and two women who met the inclusion criteria refused to take part, giving a very high response rate of 95 per cent. Information was obtained about the demographic, social and psychological characteristics of each person, as well as general and sexual aspects of their current relationship. The main function of the interview was to allow the interviewer to build up a rapport before introducing sexual topics. Each participant was then asked to complete the Golombok-Rust Inventory of Sexual Satisfaction (GRISS).[2] This questionnaire provides standardised information about sexual functioning. The relationship between psychological factors and the quality of sexual functioning will be reported elsewhere.

Half of the sample had sexual intercourse less than twice per week, with 25 per cent reporting that most weeks they did not have sex at all. Perhaps contrary to popular expectations, equal numbers of men and women (seven per cent) usually avoided or refused sex. More of the women (20 per cent) than the men (ten per cent), however, hardly ever or never became easily sexually aroused, and rather more women than men had negative feelings about sex. Twenty per cent of women usually or always became anxious when their partner wanted sex, whereas this was the case for only seven per cent of the men. Furthermore, 20 per cent of women occasionally found lovemaking disgusting compared with only three per cent of men.

The large majority of the sample enjoyed cuddling and caressing. It is interesting, however, that although everyone liked their genitals being touched by their partner at least occasionally, 27 per cent of the men and 20 per cent of the women usually or always disliked doing this to their partner. Communication about sex was sometimes poor. Ten per cent of the men and seven per cent of the women usually or

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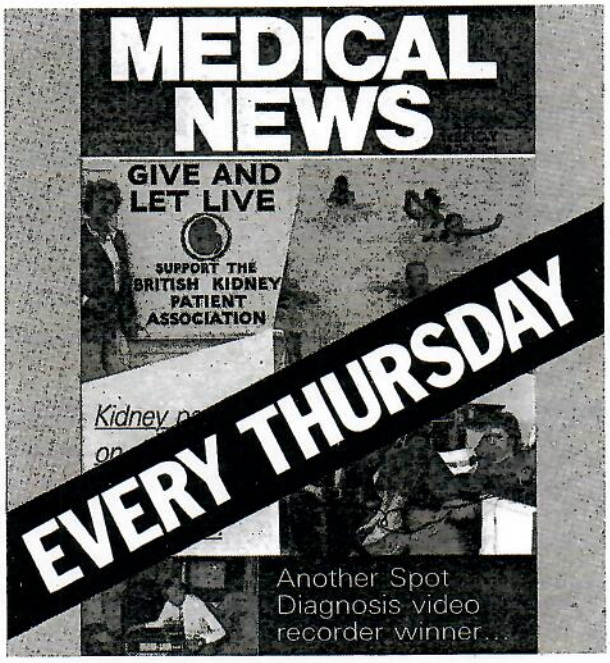

always found it hard to tell their partner about their likes and dislikes, whereas a larger proportion (20 per cent of men and 27 per cent of women) hardly ever or never asked about their partner's feelings. Only seven per cent of both men and women usually or always felt a lack of love and affection in their sexual relationship, but rather more women than men (20 per cent and ten per cent respectively) felt this occasionally.

As far as specific dysfunctions are concerned, 17 per cent of the women were completely anorgasmic with their partner, with a further 13 per cent hardly ever or only occasionally reaching a climax with him. However, only seven per cent of these women found it impossible to reach an orgasm at all. None of the women would be clinically diagnosed as having vaginismus, although 10 per cent reported that penile penetration usually or always caused some discomfort and 20 per cent occasionally found penetration impossible. Some of the women were usually, if not always, dissatisfied with the amount of time spent on foreplay (10 per cent) and on intercourse itself (13 per cent).

For men, mild premature ejaculation was quite common. Twenty per cent were hardly ever or never able to delay ejaculation during sexual intercourse, but none usually ejaculated by accident just before or after penetration. None were completely impotent, although seven per cent were usually unable to obtain an erection and a further 23 per cent occasionally lost their erection during sexual intercourse. Thirty per cent of the men were dissatisfied with the amount of variety in their sexual relationship with their partner and 20 per cent felt that they did not have sexual intercourse as often as they would like.

Thus, it seems that many more people appear to experience sexual problems than might have been expected from the relatively small numbers who complain to their GP. However, practically all of the men (97 per cent) and a large majority of the women (77 per cent) were usually or always satisfied with their sexual relationship, which could well explain why GPs are not approached about sexual problems more frequently. The findings that more women than men were dissatisfied with their sexual relationship, had more difficulty in becoming sexually aroused and had negative feelings about sex are in line with the suggestion that British women are concerned with the overall quality of the sexual relationship rather than specific dysfunctions.[3] Men, it seems, are not dissatisfied unless the problem is severely detrimental to their performance. Perhaps if men were less satisfied, the quality of the sexual relationship would improve for women? □

References

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