

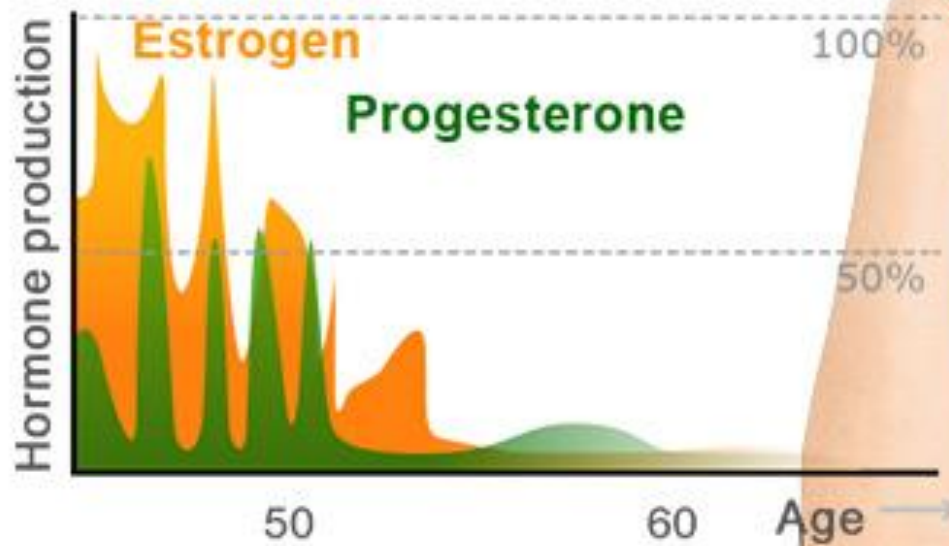
Sex and the Menopausal Woman: Resisting Representations of the Abject Asexual Woman

Jane Ussher and Janette Perz
Translational Health Research Institute
School of Medicine
University of Western Sydney

Abject menopause



**Hormonal imbalance
can cause headaches.**





The Most Common Menopause Symptoms



Hot
Flashes



Night
Sweats



Irregular
Periods



Loss of
Libido

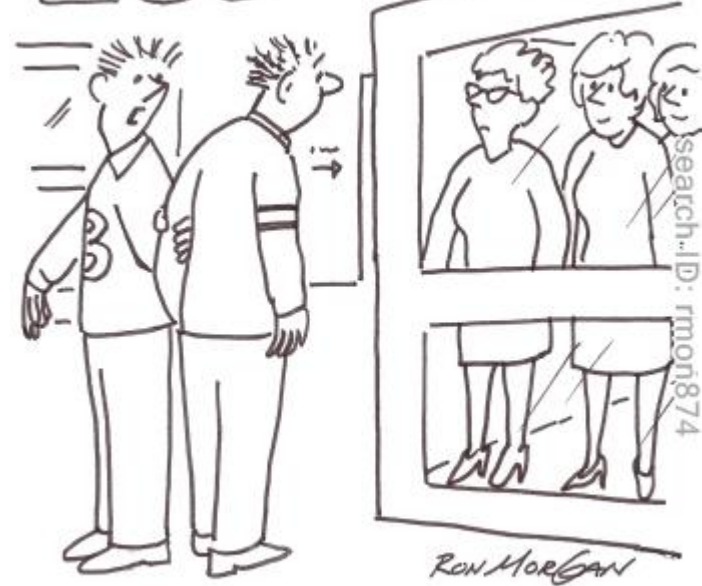


Vaginal
Dryness





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"Don't get too close -- that's the new cougar display."



Medically managed menopausal sexuality

“No woman can escape the horror of this living decay...even the most valiant woman can no longer hide the fact that she is, in effect, no longer a woman’, with ‘dowager’s hump, ugly body contours, flaccidity of the breast, and atrophy of the genitals’ manifesting her sexual decline” (Robert Wilson, 1966, p. 43)

HRT – to ensure that a woman was “capable of being physically and emotionally fulfilled by her husband or lover”(p. 65), with the drugs producing a *“sexually restored woman”* (p. 21), through maintaining her “total femininity”(p. 19).

The myth of menopausal asexuality

- Large scale population studies - women's sexual *activity* and *desire* does not inevitably decline with age
- Some women report improved sexual desire and functioning at midlife and beyond
- But: some women *do* experience sexual changes during and after menopause
 - Because of physical, psychological and relational changes - not raging hormones

Paper Aims

- Critical examination of women's experiences of sexuality after menopause
- In context of medical and cultural constructions of abject asexual menopausal women
- Acknowledging material-discursive-intrapsychic context of sexual change

Study details

- 21 women – midlife transitions
- 39 women, premature menopause after cancer
 - Cancer diagnosed 5 years previously on average
- 85% heterosexual, average age 53 in both studies
- In depth interviews, face to face
- Theoretical thematic analysis
 - Material-discursive-intrapsychic (MDI) perspective

Intrapsychic negotiation of sexual and embodied change



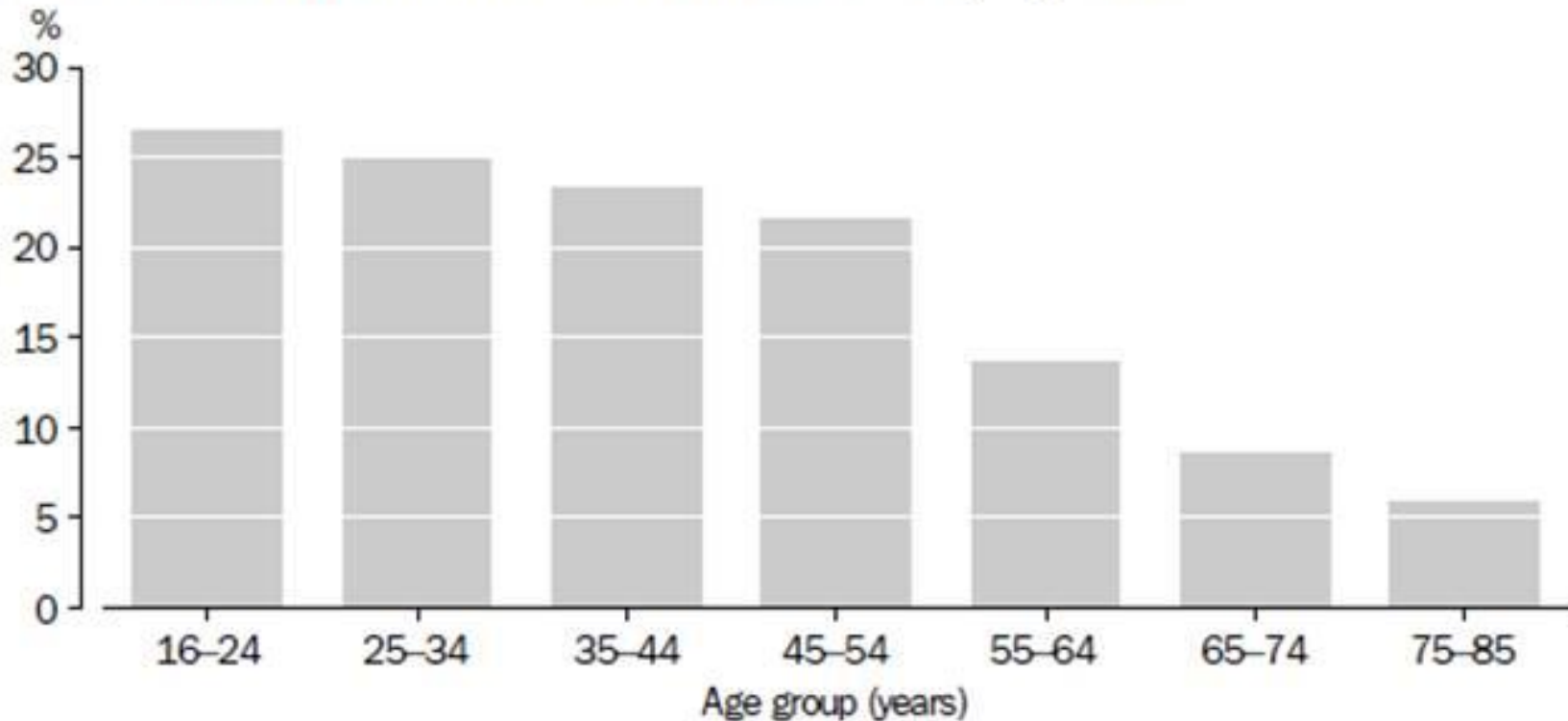
- Psychological wellbeing a more important predictor of sexual activity than hormonal status
 - Women who are distressed less likely to be interested in sex (Bancroft and Graham, 2011)
 - Psych wellbeing more important predictor of sex at menopause than at younger age

“I was a bit depressed as well, so that depression also turns you off wanting sex”.

- But – most menopausal women not depressed

Age

2. 12-MONTH MENTAL DISORDERS (a), by Age(b)



(a) Persons who met criteria for diagnosis of a lifetime mental disorder (with hierarchy) and had symptoms in the 12 months prior to interview. A person may have had more than one mental disorder.

(b) Persons who had a 12-month mental disorder as a proportion of all persons in that same age group.

Intrapsychic influences on sexuality

- **Constructing sex as important significant predictor of sexual activity** (Thomas et al 2014)
 - 602 women – longitudinal study

While my partner has always been my love, she is very much the centre of my life. We make more time in our life to have kisses, cuddles and hold hands. I never leave the house without telling her 'I love you'...***Sexuality is important in my relationship to express my love and support for my beautiful woman.***

Can result in distress if sexual difficulty is experienced:

It is horrible and continues to be so. ***I have no sexual drive*** and ***due to the side effects of menopause*** I do not lubricate, the skin external and internal to the vagina is very delicate tearing easily. So ***sex is now painful for me*** regardless of the type of lubricants we use. My partner is very patient and very kind and we spend lots of time on foreplay, but sex remains very difficult. ***It makes me feel like a failure as a woman and as a wife. I feel broken.***

Ellen, premature menopause after breast cancer

- **Sex as not important for some women**

“I almost feel like sexless in a sense. *I’d rather have a cup of tea and a book and be by myself*”.

- Midlife and older women less likely to be upset by changes in sexual desire (Bancroft et al 2003)

“When you’re younger...there’s *that real primal looking for a partner thing*. It’s such a huge, about 50%, of your life, isn’t it? *All of that’s gone now, and I can do what I really want to do*, and that’s one of the best things about middle age”

- **Meaning of menopause – influences construction of menopausal change**

Positive

“on the one hand it’s relief (*laughs*) that stage is past and um, ***huge relief at not having to go through the monthly ritual of having a period*** anymore”

“In certain ways I think there’s a lot of sexual freedom still comes with that next stage of your ***life... You don’t have to worry that if you happen to forget taking the pill*** or do something which you could end up pregnant at 48 years of age. ***I see a lot of freedom moving through this stage***”.

■ Premature menopause after cancer – a shock

Dys-appearing body

“Terrible! I am young and ***had not expected the side effects sexually that come from menopause and treatments.....very sad***”

“Devastating. A complete shock, ***no one tells you that it ruins your sex life***”

“It was totally unexpected ... made me feel that I had lost something very precious. ***I just wanted to be normal again***”.

“loss of all the things that keep you going and feeling like you’re a sexual ***animal***”

Feeling sexy or frumpy: Body image and the male gaze



Embodied signs of aging

- Skin and hair changes, weight gain, wrinkles
- Can influence sexual desire and activity – if women internalise notion of youth = sexuality

“I feel less feminine and less desirable”

“I feel a lot less desirable and that affects my confidence hugely. It makes me avoid sex at times”.

Invisibility in male gaze

Yes, *after the age of forty I noticed that I became invisible to men* and I'd heard about that and I thought, well I don't really care because I'm married anyway, I shouldn't care, but I do care. *I still want to be attractive to men, I still want men to notice me*, I want men to try and get onto me.... *And for some reason they just don't*, especially men my age or older. You see them looking through you to the young babe behind you, the young twenty year olds and probably even up to thirty year olds, *and it's the most horrible feeling.*

Accepting embodied change - positive body image

- 1/4 – 1/3 women feel more comfortable and positive in their bodies after menopause (Dillaway, 2005)
- Many women experience less appearance anxiety and self-objectification (Tiggemann et al 2001)
- Associated with greater sexual desire, response and activity at midlife
- Circular – sexually active women feel more sexually attractive (Bancroft et al 2003)

Accepting embodied change - positive body image

“I'm more comfortable with my body and self since the onset of menopause - I think because I'm on a big health kick and am in better shape than before - also less willing to let little things upset me, so if anything, ***our sexual relationship is better***”;

“my sexuality has changed for the better, ***I feel better about myself, more accepting of my body and sexuality***”.



Indifference or desire? The relational context of sexuality during menopause



- Biomedical models - women's sexuality at midlife an individual experience, located in the (dys)functional body
- Midlife women - conceptualize desire in the context of their intimate relationship (Goldhammer & McCabe, 2011)
 - Sexual changes at menopause attributed to their relationship (Dillaway, 2005; Hyde, 2011)
 - Presence of a sexual partner a significant predictor of women's desire in later life (DeLamater & Sill, 2005)
 - Quality of sexual relationship a more important predictor of continued engagement and enjoyment of sex than hormonal status (Dennerstein, 2005)

Relational context of sexuality at menopause

New relationships

“My new partner has commented that we have *the best sex she has had.*”

“My husband was generally not interested in sex, but my new partner was much more interested, and *the sex is very good.*”

Long term relationships

“Well, that’s right, you just accept the [sexual] changes and that and how things are. If you were in a new relationship, you’d be bonking every day but you know, *when you’ve been together 35 years, you don’t need to do it every day.* I wouldn’t want to [laughter]”.

Partner response to woman's embodied change - negative

“Our sex life was not great before - ***now it is non-existent.*** Despite trying to still see myself as [a] normal sexual being, the 'closed door' attitude of my partner has hurt me & I now struggle with my self-esteem - ***I am now 68, but still, I am told, an attractive woman. I find it very hard to retain this belief at times***”.

“I was worried my partner would not find me attractive after menopause”.

Partner response to woman's embodied change - positive

“My partner tells me I am beautiful, and so I have to believe it”

*“it has strengthened our relationship and made me feel more confident sexually and physically that **he obviously does find me attractive.**”*

- Importance of being desired

*“**she shows she loves me** more often, both in and out of the bedroom”*

*“my husband still loves me and desires me so **that has made me feel appreciated by him** and I love him even more.”*

Sexual problems of partners

*“My husband’s had a lot of problems with it, with getting an erection, so **our sex life is over**”;*

*“His testosterone levels have dropped to pretty well much nothing and he just can’t get an erection, so there’s no, **we haven’t had sex for about two, two and a half years.**”*

Re-negotiating sexuality – a relational experience

- Couple communication about sex, and ability to adapt to changes to sexual functioning, key to maintaining sexual activity (Perz and Ussher, 2016)
- Resisting coital imperative: mutual masturbation and oral sex - described as like “being teenagers again”

“learning different techniques on how to do hand jobs and, and just things like that is interesting and fun, and ***our sex life is very good***”

Talking - renegotiating

We tend to be *very open communicators in the bedroom*. We're also probably on the fringe of on the top echelon of wanting to explore and to try different things. So we'll see, *we tend to see if a) does it work, b) does it feel good, c) if both a and b work well that's great. If A and B don't work well then we don't do that one again. We stop .*

Conclusion

- Materiality of embodied change at menopause – can influence sexual functioning for some women
- Not necessarily problematic – sexual desire and activity, influenced by:
 - Cultural and relational context
 - Meaning of changes to woman and her partner
 - Discourses of sexuality and aging



Continued sexual activity or renegotiated sex

Or: Reduced sexual activity - accepted as part of life – or positioned as ‘symptoms’

**I'M
STILL
HOT,
IT JUST
COMES IN
FLASHES
NOW**

