

Your body, your choice

WOMEN SEEK GENITAL SURGERY FOR NUMEROUS REASONS, AND THESE ARE OFTEN OVERLOOKED IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA, SAYS ADELAIDE PELVIC RECONSTRUCTIVE SURGEON **DR OSEKA ONUMA**.

Recently there has been a lot of negative talk in mainstream media about the rising popularity of the 'designer vagina'. While such coverage may go some way in increasing public education and awareness of genital surgery options available to women, it does nothing to remove the stigma of these procedures.

The number of women who appear to be patronised by mainstream media and even by some members of the medical community when seeking help is disappointing.

Comments that have been reported to me range from 'Only strippers need that' to 'It's all part of being a woman'. When one considers that seeking help with labial issues is embarrassing to most women, to be treated with such lack of empathy means that many women never seek help for the problem again.

The vast majority of my patients seeking vaginal rejuvenation are not motivated by the so-called 'porn aesthetic' as touted by many women's magazines but a growing dislike of pain during intercourse or labial discomfort when participating in everyday activities.

Some women live with the discomfort of oversized labia for many years and adopt strategies to reduce discomfort such as wearing loose clothing. A significant number of women who come to see me for a labiaplasty say they

have only recently become aware they can actually have something done to improve their situation.

Few women find it easy to talk to strangers, doctors or friends about a loose vagina, labial discomfort or lack of vaginal sensation. These issues, however, need to be raised and explored in order to provide the options for improving quality of life.

As women become more aware that it is possible to correct potentially embarrassing problems, there is a growing demand for female genital surgery procedures. They can increase a woman's confidence in herself and her relationships, as well as her overall quality of life.

These days women are less willing to accept changes in genital anatomy resulting from pregnancy, childbirth and ageing. They are less likely to have the attitude 'it's just part of being a woman'. Providing knowledge, choices and alternatives is an essential part of delivering a quality medical service to improve the quality of life and function of each patient.

It is important to listen to the concerns of the individual patient, assess them with examination to establish a diagnosis and then offer a series of potential solutions with detailed discussion about how each approach might impact positively or negatively if adopted.

What problems can be treated?

The kinds of problems are as varied as the women who suffer from them. They include protrusions or a lump within the vagina, scar tissue, discomfort, or sagging at the entrance to the vagina.

Oversized, elongated or asymmetrical labia minora, the inner vaginal lips which surround the entrance to the vagina, can cause irritation and discomfort when wearing certain clothes or doing things such as bicycle and horse riding or during sexual intercourse.

In addition, loose or weak vaginal muscles, mainly caused through the muscles stretching during childbirth, can cause problems for some women and their sexual partners during intercourse.

Another problem may be female stress urinary incontinence, caused predominantly by an improperly functioning urethra. When a woman suffers from stress urinary incontinence, weakened muscle and pelvic tissue do not support the urethra adequately. As a result, the urethra doesn't maintain a tight seal during exercise or other movement such as coughing or laughing, and urine invariably escapes.

There is now a range of surgical options available that can address and hopefully resolve these problems. Laser reduction labiaplasty can sculpt the elongated or unequal labial minora as desired.

Labioplasty techniques can also reconstruct conditions that are a result of the ageing process, childbirth trauma or injury. The procedure can provide a youthful and aesthetically appealing vulva. The vulvar structures (including the labia minora, labia majora, mons pubis, perineum, entrance to the vagina and hymen) can be surgically enhanced, both functionally and aesthetically.

Laser vaginal rejuvenation can effectively enhance vaginal muscle tone, strength and control. In my experience, laser techniques enhance precision-reliant procedures with controlled accuracy and result in rapid healing, less pain and faster recovery.

The tensionless vaginal tape, or TVT sling, is a minimally invasive procedure during which a Prolene tape sling is inserted to correct stress urinary incontinence. The Prolene mesh is inserted through the vagina and positioned underneath the urethra, creating a supportive sling, which is held in place by surrounding tissues rather than sutured into position. During movement or exercise, the mesh supports the urethra, allowing it to maintain its seal to prevent urine loss.

All women are born with differently shaped genitalia, and with the effects of childbirth and age, many can suffer from problems with their genitalia that can make them feel very self-conscious and unhappy, often affecting relationships with sexual partners. Changes to her external genital structures can help restore a woman's self-image and esteem. **csbm**

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To empower women with knowledge, choice and alternatives



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