



genital surgery

# RESTORING FUNCTION

ADELAIDE PELVIC RECONSTRUCTIVE SURGEON **DR OSEKA ONUMA** SAYS GENITAL SURGERY TO RESTORE FORM AND FUNCTION CAN SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVE A WOMAN'S QUALITY OF LIFE. TARA CASEY REPORTS.

A woman's body goes through many changes during pregnancy and after childbirth. While some of these changes are temporary, others can remain with women indefinitely after their childbearing years. One such problem is perineum damage during childbirth.

The perineum is the junction between the labial opening to the vagina and the anus. It is also the point at which the pelvic muscles anchor in from each side and the labia minora drop into this point. 'The perineal muscle is the fulcrum for support and provides the aesthetics for the vagina,' says Adelaide pelvic reconstructive surgeon Dr Oseka Onuma. 'Therefore, its form and function are intertwined.'

According to Dr Onuma, the perineal area is generally a neglected part of the female genitalia; its care is dependent upon a doctor's awareness and ability to treat or operate. 'Abnormalities range from functional problems and appearance, pain or lack of sensation. Careful examination of the whole area is paramount so the form and function of the vagina can be treated holistically,' he explains.

Changes can also occur to this area of the body as part of the natural ageing process. As the connective tissue becomes weaker, there is a loss of muscle control. 'More commonly, the perineum is damaged during the trauma of childbirth,' Dr Oseka explains. 'As the baby emerges, the tissues can be stretched without tearing, resulting in a wide, open vagina after childbirth and a loss of sensation during intercourse. Alternatively, the muscle fibres may be damaged by tearing.'

In addition, scar tissue can also develop as a result of the tearing or can be medically induced by an episiotomy, which is an incision performed to increase the opening of the vagina to facilitate delivery of the baby and avoid a jagged rip of the perineum.

'Episiotomy can be associated with extensions or tears into the muscle of the rectum or even the rectum itself,' says Dr Onuma. 'Other complications include bleeding, infection, swelling and local pain. Also, there are some tears that occur when no incision is made that are very difficult to repair.'

The scar tissue looks abnormal and can cause discomfort if it rubs against underwear. 'Damage to the perineum can cause a woman emotional distress, and can affect her relationship with her sexual partner,' says Dr Onuma. 'After childbirth, the perineum may be swollen. Intercourse can be painful due to scar tissue, and its removal is a difficult operation.'

'The tissue is weaker and the complex surgery to repair a lot of damage is complicated and intricate, involving the perineal body, the labia and the lower half of the vagina,' he continues.

The surgery to reconstruct the perineal muscle and the lower aspects of the labia takes about one and a half hours in most cases. It can only be undertaken after careful examination of the whole area and not less than four months after childbirth.

Scar tissue may also be in the form of skin tags at the anal margin. 'Their removal is straightforward,' Dr Onuma says. 'However, post-surgical management may be difficult because of the bacteria associated with the area, which may lead to wound breakdown. Patients must be counselled with regard to care during the healing phase, which can be painful.'

The perineal area and lower aspects of the labia can be affected by a variety of conditions. Topical steroids are used to treat non-specific dermatitis and contact dermatitis, which can occur due to the detergents used to wash underwear, and lichen sclerosis, a thickening of the skin with white patches, the cause of which is unknown.

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.

'It is important to listen to the concerns of the individual patient, assess them with examination and appropriate investigations 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,' says Dr Onuma.

'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,' he says. 'No woman needs to suffer conditions that can be treated.' **acsm**

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