

Menopause and the culture of ignorance

If someone were to tell a woman going through menopause that the hot flashes she is experiencing are all in her head, there would, no doubt, be a mass outcry denouncing this kind of misinformation.

Yet a recent [CBC story](#) suggesting “vaginal atrophy” is largely a promotion by big pharma, and not a painful condition suffered by women, has gone, as yet, unchallenged.

Only about 20% of women in Canada are lucky enough to consider themselves asymptomatic during menopause. But up to 80% claim to suffer from at least one menopausal symptom including mood swings, irritability, interrupted sleep, hot flashes or vaginal dryness.

In spite of the fact that about half the population over 50 are in various degrees of physical discomfort from these diverse symptoms, we still aren't talking about it. Yet in multiple surveys women indicate they avoid intimacy, starting with menopause, because they are worried about painful sex.

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC) is a leading authority on women's health in Canada. We believe it is time women stopped suffering in silence. Menopause is a natural step in the aging process that not only impacts most women experiencing it; it also has a profound impact on their partners. For improved quality of life, we must stop the culture of ignorance that surrounds menopause and set the record straight.

If you hit menopause in the last 15 years, odds are you never talked to anyone other than google about it or sought any medical treatment. A whole generation of women flushed their replacement hormone therapy (HT) pills down the toilet after a 2002 Women's Health Initiative (WHI) study linked the hormones with an increased risk of breast cancer and cognitive impairment in postmenopausal women. The effect of this has been likened to “a bomb dropped on women kind.”

Since then SOGC and other significant research studies have countered the WHI findings and confirmed that HT is both a safe and effective way to treat many symptoms of menopause. HT may be recommended for women with moderate to severe menopause symptoms, or for those

who have had a hysterectomy or reached menopause at a young age - before 50. HT helps restore balance in a woman's body after her ovaries have stopped producing estrogen and progesterone.

When there is a decline in ovarian function, many women also experience symptoms of discomfort, dryness, itching, burning and dyspareunia (painful intercourse). This is known as the chronic condition that was called vaginal atrophy, and is now referred to as the Genito-urinary Syndrome of Menopause, as the changes affect the bladder as well as the genital tissues. Clinical studies have found here too, that local estrogen therapy can reduce vaginal discomfort and lead to the restoration of a satisfying sex life for women who had otherwise been unable to have intercourse, or could only participate with pain and difficulty.

This brings us back to the recent CBC story which was critical of a public relations campaign about treatment for vaginal atrophy that failed to disclose it was sponsored by the pharmaceutical company Novo Nordisk. That was part of the story. The other part attempted to discredit the condition itself and quoted one doctor as saying vaginal atrophy isn't a disease and the PR campaign makes 'a pathological diagnosis out of something that's normal and that women can usually deal with.'

The report ended with the notion that the public can expect to hear more about vaginal atrophy because there are new drugs in the pipeline.

And so the misinformation and misinterpretation of the information continues.

Yes there are new drugs in the pipeline to help mitigate many of the symptoms associated with menopause. There are also new studies every day that show exercise, diet, and lubricants can also help deal with the severity of side effects from menopause. It is our job as health care professionals to read the literature, talk about it, and educate our patients about the normal life progression as we get older.

After all, increasing longevity means many women will live about 40% of their lives after menopause.

That means it is certainly worth restarting the conversation - but with the facts.