Sexual dysfunction: the importance of involving the partner

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The partner of a man with sexual problems has a vital role in encouraging him to seek help.

Men are notoriously reluctant to seek help for their health problems. On average, men die just over four years earlier than women: in 2006–8, males in the UK had a life expectancy at birth of 77.4 years compared with 81.6 years for females. It is well established that erectile dysfunction (ED) is a marker for other comorbidities, so it is paramount to diagnose ED as soon as possible (Box 1).

WOMEN AND HEALTHCARE
From an anthropological and historical aspect, the female has played a very powerful role in society, and this is still true today in many cultures. Women are comfortable in accessing healthcare, whether it be for themselves or their children. They are used to being prodded and poked, and to having smear checks, consultations about contraception and appointments for mammography.

That is not to say that all females are au fait with seeking help for problems 'down below'; one very common example is vaginismus, which from my clinical experience can break up relationships.

POWER OF THE PENIS
This historical importance of healthcare for women does not mean that the male of the species is second rate. Man’s best friend, the penis, particularly when erect,

BOX 1. Importance of diagnosing erectile dysfunction as early as possible

- ED is a diagnostic marker for conditions such as diabetes mellitus and cardiovascular disease
- Patients often present with ED several years before these conditions are diagnosed
- ED affects 52 per cent of men aged 40–70 years and is distressing to both patients and their partners

Figure 1. Cerne Abbas giant. The erect penis has featured in many societies over thousands of years (©Skyscan/Science Photo Library)

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On average, men with ED will suffer for 17 months before seeking medical help. Their confidence and self-esteem will have been affected, and their relationships put under great strain. 77 per cent of men whose treatment does not work first time worry that their ED might be permanent.

BOX 2. Impact of erectile dysfunction

- On average, men with ED will suffer for 17 months before seeking medical help
- Their confidence and self-esteem will have been affected, and their relationships put under great strain
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KEY POINTS

- Historically and culturally, the bedrock of self-care has rested within the family, usually with a female
- The partner will be aware of most of the warning signs and is a powerful tool in persuading the man with sexual dysfunction to seek help

SEEKING OUT THE PARTNER

Picture the situation: the man has a penile problem and his partner is aware of his difficulty. She may be yearning for him to ‘do something about it’, or at least get it assessed, as some couples are not sexually active by the time ED presents itself.

Healthcare professionals need to use every opportunity to search out the partner and use her as an ally to persuade ‘her man’ to come forward for help when he is experiencing sexual dysfunction. We need to encourage the partner to make an appointment. In my experience, it is often the woman who makes the appointment for her partner, whatever the medical need.

The media also has a powerful role in providing information. I find that men often present me with a newspaper cutting at the consultation. This has several purposes, including helping with lack of articulation or eye contact, something that patients frequently find difficult when discussing embarrassing issues. This small piece of paper enables the man (who is squirming in his chair) to have something with which to start the consultation.

The articles also provide a means of initiating discussions at home, enabling the woman to show her partner that he is not the only one to suffer from such an affliction. On occasion, however, this approach can backfire and provoke defensive aggression from the man. The woman may then come to see her GP with a different problem, hoping that the doctor will be able to tease out the real reason for her attendance (Box 3).

Declaration of interests

None.

REFERENCES