



genital surgery

# hide and seek

Adelaide gynaecologist and pelvic reconstruction surgeon **Dr Oseka Onuma** explains the psychological and physical benefits of female genital surgery. Sarah Friggieri reports.

**H**ow normal and attractive are your genitals? Most women won't be able to answer this because – unlike men – we typically don't compare notes with each other in the change rooms.

Many women feel ashamed talking about the so-called 'embarrassing areas' of their bodies, which is why procedures to do with the female genitalia are some of the least talked about areas of cosmetic surgery.

Adelaide gynaecologist and pelvic reconstruction surgeon Dr Oseka Onuma says women should not feel embarrassed when enquiring about any parts of their genitalia that they are not comfortable with.

'The function and form of the different parts of the vagina are closely linked to the female psyche and the perception of self in terms of attractiveness,' he says. 'Therefore, it is essential that the individual patient brings her concerns to her doctor, who should listen carefully and assess them through examination and appropriate investigations to establish a diagnosis.'

'Only then can the surgeon offer patients potential solutions, with detailed discussion about how each approach might impact her life both positively and negatively,' he continues.

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, which often affects relationships with sexual partners.

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, and discomfort or sagging at the entrance to the vagina. Oversized, elongated or asymmetrical labia minora – the inner vaginal lips that surround the entrance to the vagina – can also cause irritation and discomfort when wearing certain clothes or during activities such as bicycle and horse riding or during sexual intercourse.

Additionally, loose or weak vaginal muscles, mainly attributed to the stretching of the muscles during childbirth, can cause problems for some women and their sexual partners during intercourse.

'Childbirth can change the shape and tone of vaginal tissue, sometimes resulting in embarrassment and occasionally loss of sexual satisfaction,' says Dr Onuma. 'After childbirth, sufferers often try to ignore any reduced ability to contract the vaginal walls, the impression of looseness and reduced sensation during intercourse.'

Stress urinary incontinence, mainly caused by an improperly functioning urethra, is another common problem that females experience. When a woman suffers from stress urinary incontinence, weakened muscle and pelvic tissue don't support the urethra adequately. As a result,

the urethra doesn't maintain a tight seal during exercise or other movements, such as coughing or laughing, and urine escapes. 'Women with stress incontinence generally have a reduced impression of their own wellbeing and attractiveness to others, and this can affect their relationships with intimate partners,' explains Dr Onuma.

'In addressing any problem, it is crucial to ascertain what is really bothering the patient,' he says. 'I never make assumptions as the real problem may be more subtle than the one being expressed. I want to know not only the symptoms but also the length of time they have been endured and how her quality of life is being effected. After a thorough examination, the correlation of the clinical findings with the symptoms results in higher success rates – both in terms of the surgery and patient satisfaction.'

The range of surgical options available can now address and hopefully resolve these problems. 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. It requires a short operating and hospitalisation time and relatively quick recovery.

'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.'

## 'The function and form of the vagina are closely linked to the female psyche'

Laser reduction labioplasty can sculpt the elongated or unequal labia minora as desired. Dr Onuma says, 'Labioplasty techniques can also reconstruct conditions that are a result of the ageing process, childbirth trauma or injury. The procedure can provide a more youthful and aesthetically appealing vulva.'

The vulva 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 improve vaginal muscle tone, strength and control. Laser techniques enhance precision-reliant procedures with controlled accuracy and result in rapid healing, less pain and overall faster recovery.

Changes to her external genital structures can restore a woman's inner self – in terms of image and esteem. 'No woman should suffer embarrassment or feel inhibited in her relationship with her partner due to the appearance of her vagina or physical sexual dysfunction,' says Dr Onuma. 'Engaging in a frank discussion with her gynaecologist is the first step to alleviating her anxieties.' **acsm**

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