



# Facilitating sexual health discussions in primary care with older Australians: Patient perspectives

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Sexual Health and Ageing, Perspectives and Education – SHAPE Project.

- Four complementary qualitative studies investigating sexual health discussions with patients aged 60+ in primary health care in Australia
- Adults aged 60+ interviewed (Sue Malta)
- GPs, practice nurses and key informants interviewed (medical students)
  - Ms Jenni Lyne
  - Mr Jesse Hunter
  - Mr Declan McGavin
- Supported by a grant from the Hallmark Ageing Research Initiative (HARI) Seed Fund



## Globally –

- 901 million people aged 60+ (12%)
- over 60s are growing at 3.3% per year
- the number of persons aged 60 and above is expected to more than double by 2050

## In Australia –

- 20% are aged 60+
- % growing each year



United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision, United Nations, 2015. Australian Bureau of Statistics-National population by age and sex.



- Ageing population, more chronic conditions
- Sexual activity enhances physical and mental health during ageing<sup>1</sup>
- Sexual activity enhances cognitive ability during ageing<sup>2</sup>
- Sexual health is important to older adults but overlooked in policy and by health care providers<sup>3</sup>



<http://100feminin.fr/14-photos-hilarantes-de-couples-prouvent-lamour-na-dage/>

1. Lindau ST, et al. *BMJ* 2010; 9(340). 2. Wright H, et al. *J Geron B Psych Science Social Science* 2017; Advanced access June 21 2017. 3. Kirkman L, Kenny A, Fox C. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*. 2013;10(2):135-48.



- An Australian survey of 2137 males and females of 60+ years showed that 72% of participants were sexually active in the last year<sup>1</sup>
- In a study of 2783 men aged 75-95, one third were sexually active. Lack of sexual activity was associated with health problems<sup>2</sup>



Image: <http://jo-virgoladyy.blogspot.ca/2013/01/old-couple-make-me-believe-where-real.html>

1. Lyons A, Heywood W, Fileborn B, Minichiello V, Barrett C, Brown G, et al. Culture, Health & Sexuality, 2017:1-15.

2. Hyde et al. Prevalence of Sexual Activity and Associated Factors in Men Aged 75 to 95 Years. Ann Intern Med. 2010;153:693-702.



- Incidence of sexual difficulties increases with age; >50% of sexually active 60+ yrs report at least one sexual difficulty in the last year
- Last 5 years, chlamydia, gonorrhoea and syphilis diagnoses<sup>1</sup> increased by 50% in over 60 year olds<sup>2</sup>
- Online dating increasing among over 60yr olds
- Many over 60s who are dating have sex on the first date with most initiating sexual activity within 4 weeks of meeting<sup>3</sup>
- Older women using internet dating less likely to insist on condoms<sup>4</sup>



1. Mitchell KR, et al. *Lancet* 2013; 382(9907): 1817-29.

2. National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System accessed 19<sup>th</sup> October 2017.

3. Malta S. Intimacy and Older Adults: A Comparison between Online and Offline Romantic Relationships. *Re-imagining Sociol.* 2008;(February):1-18.

4. Bateson D et al. When online becomes offline: attitudes to safer sex practices in older and younger women using an Australian internet dating service. *Sexual Health*, 2012, 9 (2) : 152-9.



- Sexual health is a core preventive health activity for young adults, but is seldom discussed between GPs and older patients.<sup>1</sup>
- Barriers to discussing with older patients include lack of training, insufficient knowledge about older adults' sexual health needs and assumptions that older patients have little interest in sexual activity.<sup>2,3</sup>
- While embarrassed to initiate sexual health discussions with GPs, older adults want to be asked and to have the opportunity to discuss their concerns.<sup>2,3</sup>



1. Bauer et al. *Health Expect* 2015;8(10):12418. 2. Hinchliff S, et al. *J Sex Res* 2011;48(2-3):106-17. 3. Ports KA, et al. *J Sex Med* 2014;11(4):901-8.



Tools needed to facilitate sexual health discussions with older adults in general practice



***Aim: To improve sexual health and healthy ageing among men and women over their life-course***

- Explore health care providers' knowledge, attitudes and practices about the sexual health needs of older patients
  - **Identify barriers and facilitators to discussing sexual health with older patients**
  - What electronic strategies are currently available to facilitate communication and improve patient care; and how feasible are they to adapt for use with older patients around sexual health?
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Qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews

Recruitment:

- Older people through partner organisations
  - Council of the Ageing; Andrology Australia, National Ageing Research Institute

Each interview:

- digitally recorded
  - transcribed
  - thematically analysed
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## Participants

21 people aged 60 - 90+ years

12 male, 9 female

16 self-rated their health as good/very good

12 were very satisfied with their lives



Three themes:

- Sexuality is important
  - Few GPs and few older patients initiate sexual health conversations
  - Barriers: embarrassment, not knowing what to ask, fear of being judged, privacy
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## Sexuality is important

*“People get told things, that once you reach a certain age things stop happening and you shouldn’t expect to feel sexy or to have some sexual activity in your life, but I don’t agree with that” (OA1, female, 60-69)*

*“[It’s] as important as eating, and it’s to be encouraged” (OA14, male, 70-79)*

*“Generally in the GP world there seems to be a view that people, particularly women over the age of 50, that nothing happens between their neck and their knees... [we’re] still sexual beings... [it’s] just a normal part of who we are” (OA19, female, 60-69)*

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## Sexual health conversations

*"I've never had an issue that I wanted to talk to my doctor about, but I think if it was anyone, it should be me bringing it up" (OA4, male, 60-69)*

*"[It came up] in an off-hand way, when I had time off work due to an illness [and] we were talking about ways to fill in the day. I said I was going to watch... Game of Thrones. She said 'oh no, that might be a bit sexy for somebody your age'" (OA1, female, 60-69)*

*"My HCP has never initiated a sexual health discussion with me. His response [to my enquiry] was "Memories, we have memories" (OA6, male, 60-69)*

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## Barriers and enablers

### **Barriers : embarrassment, not knowing what to ask, fear of being judged, privacy**

*"I can imagine people (in my generation) would be embarrassed to talk about issues involving sexual health, especially if the doctor was younger than them" (OA3, male, 60-69)*

*"...concern about what the reaction would be; knowing the exchange would be difficult - there was reluctance on my part" (OA16, female, 70-79)*

### **What kind of communication support resource could be used?**

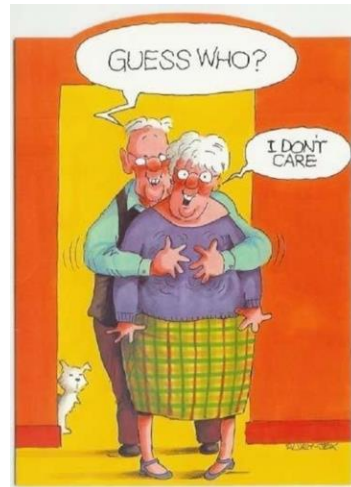
*"...website [with] articles on it... [with] links to further information or personal contact options - phone numbers or email addresses where you can interact more individually; and a [downloadable] form or checklist to take to the GP with you" (OA17, male, 70-79)*

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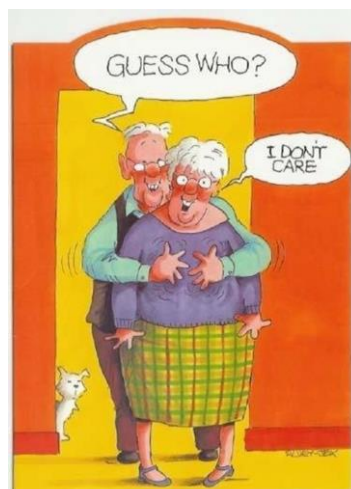
## Conclusions and future directions

- Sex is important in later life
- People, young and old, want GP-initiated sexual health discussion
- GPs and older adults are mostly uncomfortable discussing sexual health
- Patients say their concerns are shut down or trivialized



## Conclusions and future directions

- Sexuality in later life should be 'normalised' and part of routine care
- Some older people suggested sexual health should be included in regular health checks
- A resource which could encourage sexual health discussions in primary care would be a welcome initiative





**Project partners:**

- National Ageing Research Institute
  - Victorian Primary Care Practice-Based Research Network
  - Melbourne Sexual Health Clinic
  - Royal Women's Hospital
  - Andrology Australia
  - Council on the Ageing
  - Women's Health in the South East
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