

FACILITATING SEXUAL HEALTH DISCUSSIONS IN PRIMARY CARE WITH OLDER AUSTRALIANS: PATIENT PERSPECTIVES

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Background: Older adults currently make up 20% of the Australian population, a proportion expected to rise to 25% by 2030. Ongoing sexual activity has been associated with health and wellbeing, life satisfaction and lower levels of depression. Yet, sexual dysfunction increases with age and STIs are rising among older adults as increasing numbers use dating websites to find new partners. We sought to investigate barriers and facilitators to discussing sexual health with older adults in general practice.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with older patients recruited via partner organisations. The interviews explored about the importance of sexual expression, how and when discussions about sexual health with general practitioners (GPs) occurred, if at all, and what resources were needed to ensure such discussions happened. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed.

Results: Twenty-one patients were recruited aged 60-90+ years; 12 male:9 female, all but four were married or in committed relationships. The majority were very satisfied with their lives (n=12) and self-rated their health as good to very good (n=16). For these older adults sexual expression in later life was important and, in some cases, vital. Many felt unable to discuss their sexual health concerns with their GPs and some had been actively discouraged by their GPs from doing so. Many felt unable to initiate these discussions because they (or their GP) were embarrassed, or they didn't know what to ask, feared being judged or were concerned about privacy. Several suggested the use of online tools to help initiate these discussions with GPs.

Conclusion: Older patients feel that discussion of sexual health should be a normal and expected part of any consultation; and would be comfortable using an online intervention to effect such conversations.

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