Focus: Current issues in medical ethics

The meaning of sex: A view from the agony column

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This is a slightly edited version of a talk given by Mrs Claire Rayner, a journalist and broadcaster, to a conference on human sexuality held under the auspices of the London Medical Group in the spring of this year. Mrs Rayner's lively presentation conveys the problems and anxieties which people face in this area, even in this so-called 'permissive' age.

I think the most useful thing I can do for this conference is tell you what sex seems to mean to the people who write to me in my capacity as an agony aunty.

I will not attempt any analysis and I will try to avoid making any judgments, moral or otherwise, on the reasons for the facts I'll offer you. I will tell you simply what my readers tell me about the meanings of sex to them.

For those of you who may have never read the newspaper the *Sun*, I must explain that I write a regular page in that very mass-circulation journal (12½ million readers every day), dealing with a very wide range of emotional, medical and of course sexual problems. I am also the medical columnist for *Woman's Own* magazine which has 6½ million readers, and that means I often write on sexual topics there too. And finally, I do a good deal of broadcasting on both TV and radio on the same sort of themes. The reason I mention this is that these activities bring me in some 40 000 letters a year, give or take five or six, and it is from the reading of these letters – yes, I do read every one and they all get an answer – it is from these letters that I draw the conclusions that I now offer you.

Anxiety

First the bad news. As far as I can tell from my mail bag – oh, and I know perfectly well that I cannot extrapolate from my 40 000 letters a year to the entire population, in which I am perhaps unlike the learned judges who seem able to extrapolate from one case up before them to the countrywide behaviour of 13-year-old girls on Saturday nights –

as I say, for an enormous number of my readers who write to me sex means primarily anxiety.

There are the teenage girls who are absolutely terrified of their own development. I hope you'd be amazed at how often I get really frantic letters from 13-year-olds who are totally convinced they are changing sex, because the labia minora have started to grow and no one has ever told them that this is a normal piece of development. They think they are growing one or two penises on the side!

There are the 15-year-old boys who are even more alarmed because they fear they aren't developing enough. Indeed, I sometimes think that every male child is born with a tape measure clutched in his hand! Week after week these letters come pouring in, describing perfectly normal phenomena, from spotty penises to lopsided breasts, from rounded male hips to hairy female chests, all from youngsters totally convinced that they are uniquely deformed, uniquely without hope of ever living satisfactory lives, uniquely doomed to a lifetime of never being able to hold up their heads in the society into which they have been born. And running through these letters like a threnody are the masturbation letters, the 'please don't hate me for what I'm going to tell you' letters; the 'I have the worst problem anyone could ever have' letters; the 'I'm so afraid I'll never be able to marry and have children because of this awful habit, tell me how to cure myself' letters.

You know, Kinsey *et al* may or may not have been right in saying that virtually 99 per cent of adolescent males do it. As far as my mail bag is concerned, 99 per cent of them are eaten with fear and guilt because they do.

I know, of course, that sex education in schools is supposed to have done away with all that. Well, whatever it has done away with, in my experience it is missing the target wildly. Juvenile ignorance and guilt and fear and shame are as rife as ever they were. But never think it is only the adolescents who suffer anxiety. The adults are as badly placed, believe me!

As I have already mentioned, one of the journals for which I write is the *Sun*. Now, despite its apparent image of sexiness and permissiveness, it is in fact a very prudish publication in many ways, catering as it does to a fairly prudish readership. There are some words and phrases that are just not used. I can remember, for example, wanting to

publish, and in fact publishing a letter from a lady who was worried about the behaviour of her 3-year-old daughter with a little 4-year-old boy from next door. She said at one point in her letter that she'd found the children behind the sofa with their pants and knickers down and this had been changed by the subeditors to read 'with their clothing disarranged'. Now it is easy to laugh, but I promise you faithfully that that change reflected not the attitudes of the subeditors – well, anyone who knows Fleet Street subeditors will know that is true – but of our readership. They just cannot and will not cope with the sort of direct language that middle-class people today so pride themselves upon.

Whatever its origins, working-class prudery does exist and side by side with it there is, among the readers of my newspaper certainly, a myth of male supremacy. The great British working man is undoubtedly cock of his walk and I was told very soon after taking on my column that there were some subjects that these male readers would never cope with. Homosexuality was one. I'm happy to say that since then, which was three years ago, we have come on a bit and it is a subject I can and do discuss on my page very occasionally.

Impotence was another. To put it very bluntly, I was told that any suggestion that the great British working man couldn't get it up and keep it there just wasn't on! Yet, one Monday, I ran a very small item on my page from a man who said his problem was that his wife was getting very agitated, his marriage was very threatened and he was feeling pretty agitated because he couldn't make his love-making last long enough. It was all over in a matter of seconds. And I told him – and may I make the point that the whole item occupied, if it was two column inches it was a lot, foot of the page, nothing very special – I told him the problem was a common one, that it was called premature ejaculation, but there was a method he and his wife could use to deal with it and I'd send him a leaflet explaining it – and the leaflet by the way, offers a simple account of Masters and Johnston's squeeze technique and how to apply it. But the result was frankly amazing.

In the next three weeks, 18 000 requests for that leaflet arrived! Now, if I had got that sort of response from such an item in the *Observer* or the *Sunday Times* I would not have been a bit surprised. I would have expected it in fact, but from the *Sun* readership it is truly very very remarkable. It is often said in the trade that every letter actually written to a newspaper or a magazine or a TV or radio programme actually represents 99 other readers who wanted to write, meant to write but somehow never actually got round to it, so even if that estimation is only half correct, it still adds up to one hell of a lot of sexual distress and anxiety – and that of course is only part of it.

Failure to respond to sexual arousal and attempts to enjoy sex; failure to reach orgasm in both men and women; the need for some sort of offset activity ranging from the mildest of fetishism to a very marked degrees of sadomasochism; anxiety about feeling a fascination for dressing up in the clothes of the opposite sex – the transvestite dilemma; all these and many many more are represented to a greater or lesser degree in that never-ending flood of appeals for help and information and reassurance and relief of fear.

There is one more group of people who need to be mentioned, for they have sexual anxieties which are less often discussed by those who regard human sexuality as a matter primarily to do with moral attitudes. That appears to include many people at this conference. This is the group made up of people who worry about the reproductive aspects of their sexuality. As I have already implied, I do offer a leaflet information service on the commoner problems presented to me, and the one which runs a very close second indeed in popularity to the one on men's sexual problems, the premature ejaculation one, is called, 'Why can't we have a baby?' The ability to reproduce is valued a great deal more highly than some people I suspect realize. All the emphasis that is being placed these days on the role of pornography, the rights and wrongs of abortion, the ins and outs of contraception may cloud our awareness of how much people want babies, need babies and become frantic with fear, quite literally, at any threat to their ability to have babies.

I think it is perhaps because the vast majority of people who write to me make it clear that children are the only hope they have of continuance. People who are blessed with a deep religious faith that offers them the comfort of knowing they have an everlasting soul may not need the concrete evidence of immortality that children provide, but for the childless non-believer death indeed comes as the end, and even if my correspondents don't always express their anxiety in these terms – though some do, I promise you, some do – it is a feeling that comes leaping off the page to me over and over again.

So, any system of sex education or imposition of sexual morality that does not help people come to terms with the possibility of childlessness is one that I believe has a hole in it that would accommodate not only a coach and horses but the whole of the Lord Mayor's Show!

Disappointment

So, sex means for a great many of my readers anxiety of some sort or another. It also means and I am still with the bad news – disappointment. Alex Comfort, I think it was, described sex

the greatest indoor human sport. I reckon he was absolutely right. For a great many people, the only real joy and sense of deep satisfaction they ever get is from sex. I am sure there are in this audience a number of people who find enormous pleasure and satisfaction in the workings of their own minds. I don't hesitate to boast that I am one of them. I can get a great charge out of completing a piece of written work, looking upon it and finding it good – well, reasonably good; it is never perfect! I can get as high as a kite and breathless with excitement, quite literally, as I search through various texts for a piece of information, find it and slot it into an argument I am constructing. And I can go right over the top with enormous glee when I manage to demolish someone else's faulty argument. Indeed, I do know the joys of the intellectual orgasm!

But what of the people who are not allowed this sort of satisfaction, who are stuck neck-deep in dreary, desperately mind-destroying jobs? What of the man who has never been given the tools of thought or the pleasure in cerebration that is so important to so many others? What hope has he ever got of hitting the heights but his own body and

its sexual responses? I suppose if he is lucky he might find it in sport, though often it has to be in spectator sport rather than in participation. Not many of my readers can afford golf, for instance, which I am told can be a very fulfilling activity. The point I am making here is that sex means for many many people the biggest Catch 22 of them all. It promises an explosion and delivers a raspberry.

All this, as I have said, is the bad news. But, before I come to the end of my allotted time, I do want to offer you the good news and to do that I have to draw on the information that derives from the people who do *not* write to me; the sexually content, the sexually secure, the people for whom sex means not only a contented relationship and happy family life, but also a belly laugh at the comedians who make fun of our sexual foibles. I reckon real acceptance comes when you can stand up to be laughed at. These are the people who, I believe, stand happily at the end of the long, long line which runs through our history from Chaucer to Shakespeare to Fielding to Max Miller. For them sex means simply fun. And I hope none of us ever forgets that meaning.