What’s Normal? Influencing women’s perceptions of normal genitalia: An experiment involving exposure to modified and non-modified images

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The Clinical Question

- Increasing popularity of labiaplasty
  - 5 fold increase in procedures covered by the NHS in the UK 2001-2011
  - Medicare rebates doubled in Australia
- Research suggests most women believe that “normal” labia minora should not be visible beyond the labia majora
- Aesthetic concerns are the most common reason given for undergoing labiaplasty

The Clinical Question

- We explore whether misperceptions may underlie genital dissatisfaction and lead to unnecessary surgery

Description of Research

Participants: 97 women aged 18-30

Design: Experiment involving exposure to images of modified and unmodified vulvas

Comparison
- Phase 1: Random allocation across three conditions to view a series of images: (1) surgically modified, (2) non-modified, (3) control (no images)
- Phase 2: All women then used a 4 point Likert scale to rate 20 target images: 10 modified and 10 non-modified for ‘looks normal’ and ‘represents society’s ideal’

Outcomes: Women who had viewed surgically modified images rated the modified target images as more ‘normal’ and more ‘ideal’

Flow Chart of the Study

Agreed to participate (N=97)

Modified images (n=33)
Non-modified images (n = 33)
Control (no images) (n=31)

Ratings of “Normality” of Non-modified and Modified Target Images

Only those in the ‘modified’ condition rated the modified images as more normal than the non-modified
Ratings of “Society’s Ideal” of non-modified and modified target images

Summary and Conclusion
- Women in the ‘modified’ condition rated the modified vulvas as more normal than the non-modified vulvas, significantly different from the control condition, who rated the non-modified vulvas as more normal
- All three groups rated the modified vulvas as more like society’s ideal than the non-modified vulvas, but this effect was significantly strongest for the women in the ‘modified’ condition

Summary and Conclusion
- Exposure to images of modified vulvas affects women’s perceptions of what is normal and desirable
- Greater education and awareness about genital diversity and genital appearance may reduce requests for unnecessary surgery
- The health, education and voluntary sectors and the media have important roles to play

Thank you 😊

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