Neat, discreet and unseen –
young women’s views on vulval anatomy

Calida Howarth (524971)
A/Prof Meredith Temple-Smith
A/Prof Jenny Hayes, Dr Magdelena Simonis
General Practice and Primary Health Care Academic Centre

BACKGROUND

Labiaplasty is the surgical reduction of the labia minora.1 There has been a steady increase in Medicare claims (Figure 1) for this procedure, despite scarce data regarding the risks, benefits and outcomes.2 No studies have explored young women’s knowledge and perceptions of their genital anatomy. Furthermore, General Practitioners (GPs) are unsure of how to handle requests for referral for labiaplasty and women’s motivations for seeking genital surgery are unexplored.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are young women’s views on “normal” and “desirable” vulval anatomy?

METHODS

• Female students aged 18-28 years old.

• Recruitment via the University of Melbourne Student Portal and Snowball Sampling.

• Individual, semi-structured interviews conducted.

• 7 standardised photographs (including Figures 2-4) and an anatomical line drawing used to facilitate discussion.

• All interviews recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically.

RESULTS

21 interviews conducted, 25-80 minutes. Six major themes emerged:

• Participants’ views of “normal” genitalia

• Participants’ views of “ideal” genitalia

• Sources of information on genital anatomy

• Factors that influence women’s perceptions of “normal” and “ideal” genital anatomy

• Terms used to describe women’s genitals

• Views and knowledge of Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery (FGCS)

Young women are unsure what constitutes “normal” vulval anatomy. Despite this uncertainty, all participants identified Figure 2 as the socially accepted “ideal” vulva.

IMPLICATIONS

The Labia Library is a good example of a resource where women can anonymously gain information about the range of “normal” anatomy.4 GPs play an essential role in patient education and reassurance of normality. GPs receiving requests for referral for FGCS should explore women’s understanding of this.

CONCLUSIONS

Results indicated that women would benefit from access to resources showing the range of normal vulval anatomy. It is important that doctors do not assume women have knowledge of their genitalia and the terms used to describe it.

REFERENCES


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisors, the General Practice and Primary Health Care Academic Centre and all of the young women who participated in this study.

For more information contact: Calida Howarth calidah@student.unimelb.edu.au