

# LET'S TALK ABOUT SEXual health

## Exploring the sexual health of women aged 50 years and over in the Southern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne.

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### BACKGROUND

Increased life expectancy for women, coupled with higher rates of separation and divorce, has resulted in many women aged 50 years and over becoming single and seeking new sexual partners. Research suggests that women aged 50 years and over do not practice safe sex as frequently as younger women, and the incidence of STIs is increasing in this population group<sup>1,2</sup>. Efforts to respond to this growing health issue are scarce both in Australia<sup>3</sup> and internationally<sup>4,5</sup>.

At present, the sexual health of older women receives minimal attention, with research, programs and policies largely targeting the young<sup>3,6</sup>. This silence extends to the day to day lives of women 50 years and over, wherein women do not generally discuss their sexual health concerns with friends, family or with health care providers to the same extent as younger women<sup>3</sup>. The reasons for this are broad and include: shame, fear of judgement, embarrassment, and reduced general knowledge<sup>7</sup>. The lack of attention can have damaging effects on health, and reflects broad cultural, moral, social and religious beliefs that render the sexuality of women aged 50 years and over as unimportant<sup>3</sup>.

In 2012, Women's Health in the South East (WHISE) investigated this issue within the local context.

### METHOD

Women aged 50 years and over from the Southern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne were invited to participate in a focus group, individual interview or written questionnaire. Through this process, the practices, knowledge and attitudes towards sexual health were explored. Women from a diverse range of backgrounds participated. Service professionals also took part, providing expert insights into the issue.

### RESULTS

The findings showed that whilst women were knowledgeable about the importance of cervical and breast cancer screening, and completed tests regularly, they did not understand certain aspects of their sexual health including STI transmission, prevention and screening. They also understood their sexual health in narrow terms, commonly referring to it as heterosexual intercourse as opposed to broader concepts relating to sexuality.

Similarly, health service professionals stated that they commonly consult women aged 50 years and over on matters relating to breast and cervical cancer screening or menopausal symptoms, rather than sexual health issues. Health professionals expressed uncertainty as to whether it was their responsibility to address matters relating to sexual health.

Overall, participants did not readily access information or support in regard to their sexual health. When seeking help for sexual health concerns, they identified GPs as their preferred source, followed by the internet.

Almost all female participants and health service professionals recognised that the sexual health of women aged 50 years and over remains an under-discussed issue at an individual, professional and community level.

### PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

"I have a lack of interest"  
**Australian born woman aged 50 – 60 years.**

"My husband is ill and we can't do the things that we use to like to do"  
**Woman from a CALD background aged 60 – 70 years.**

"You get them (STIs) if you are a sex worker"  
**Woman from a refugee background aged 50 – 60 years.**

"Many women change with time and age and men don't understand that so they force the wife to have sex – I have many friends who are going through this"  
**Woman from a CALD background aged 60 – 70 years.**

"Young or old (sexual violence) it is an issue"  
**Woman from a refugee background aged 50 – 60 years.**

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to explore and unpack the complex factors underpinning the findings, WHISE undertook an extensive literature review, drawing upon local and international sources.

According to the literature, multiple factors influence the sexual health of women aged 50 years and over including:

- The desexualisation of older adults in western societies<sup>3</sup>
- Sexual ageism and negative stereotypes<sup>8</sup>
- The interplay between physiological and psychological factors and sexual health<sup>4</sup>
- Traumatic sexual experiences<sup>9</sup>
- The lack of targeted sexual health promotion initiatives<sup>3</sup>

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The potential for women aged 50 years and over to achieve sexual health and wellbeing depends upon a range of factors, which include:

- Access to comprehensive information about sexuality<sup>10</sup>
- Access to good-quality sexual health care<sup>1</sup>
- Positive reframing of sexual identities<sup>11</sup>
- Knowledge about risks and vulnerability to the adverse consequences of sexual activity<sup>12</sup>
- Creating an environment that affirms and promotes sexual health<sup>12</sup>

### CONCLUSION

WHISE is currently developing health promotion initiatives that will promote the sexual health of women aged 50 years and over across the Southern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne.

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