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What Importance Do Women Attribute to the Size of the Penis?

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Abstract

Objective: A great deal of men consider that the size of the penis is directly proportional to its sexual power. Some men, who are worried that their penis is too small, wish to be considered for surgical lengthening or thickening procedures. The argumentation for this chiefly points in the direction of *women*. However, have women actually been asked about the extent to which they consider the size of the penis to be of importance from a sexual point of view? Or asked what they think about ideas surrounding the size of the penis in relation with actual sexual functioning?

Patients and Methods: To address these questions, 375 sexually active women who had recently given birth at the University Hospital Groningen were asked a number of questions about sexual functioning and the importance they attach to the size of their partner's penis.

Results: A total of 170 questionnaires were returned (response rate 45%); 20% of the women found the length of the penis important and 1% very important; 55% and 22% of the women found the length of the penis unimportant and totally unimportant, respectively. Opinions about the girth of the penis followed the same trend. Length was less important than girth: 21% and 32%, respectively. The women who found the girth of the penis important had the same opinion about the length of the penis (correlation 0.71, $p = -0.001$). Median division into two subgroups (girth important/unimportant; *t*-test) did not reveal any significant differences in relation with demographic data. Correlation analysis did not reveal any significant correlation between sexual functioning (measured with the NSF) and opinions about the girth of the penis.

Conclusion: Although clearly in the minority, a nevertheless considerable percentage of the women respondents attached substantial importance to the size of the male sexual organ.

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Keywords: Size of the penis; Sexual functioning

"Its function is simply to constrict, when necessary, the part it embraces, particularly at the time of coitus. The woman's vagina in fact is so cleverly constructed that it will accommodate itself to each and every penis; it will go out to meet a short one, retire before a long one, dilate for a fat one, and constrict for a thin one. Nature has taken account of every variety of penis and so there will be no need to seek a scabbard the same size as your knife." Reinier de Graaf, 1672 [1].

1. Introduction

No other human organ receives as much verbal attention as the size of the penis. Several excellently documented papers have described the cultural-historical adventures of the male organ [2,3]. The bigger the better appears to have been the motto for more than a century [4]. In this respect, being "too small" is experienced as very humiliating in many cultures.

After realising that men regard their penis as their most "attractive" feature [5] and forming an association between size (length and girth) and functioning

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[6,7], it is easy to see why some men worry about the size of their penis [8]. The actual mean length of the penis during erection in the Netherlands is 15.2 cm and a girth of 12–13 cm [9,3]. Some cases who consider themselves less fortunate, even go as far as applying for a surgical lengthening and/or thickening procedure. No exact data are available about the number of men who apply for these surgical procedures. We only know that in the United States it is estimated that 10,000 men have undergone elective penile lengthening or girth enhancement from 1990 to 1997 [10].

Owing to the current availability of such surgical procedures, the question arises as to what arguments should be brought forward as indications for surgery [3,11]? When asked, the men in question frequently refer to the, in their opinion, judging 'authority': their wife. *But* do women actually attach as much importance to the size of the penis as (these) men assume [12]?

The literature offers very little in the way of answers. In ''Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie'', Freud [13] makes a distinction between what he considers to be the infantile clitoral orgasm and the adult vaginal orgasm. This might have been associated with the spirit of that cultural period. Perhaps at that time men could not imagine how anyone without a penis (i.e. women) could achieve sexual fulfilment. Now a days we not only know that women can reach orgasm by means of clitoral stimulation alone, but also that the majority of women become sexually aroused by coitus. What we do not know, however, is whether the size of the penis plays a role in this, physiologically or cognitively. In other words: what importance do women attribute to the size of the penis?

To address this question, an explorative study was performed. In the first place from a sexual point of view and on the second on the extent to which there is a relationship between views regarding the size of the penis and current sexual functioning.

2. Patients and methods

A sample of sexually active women was required. For practical reasons, we opted for a population of women who had given birth to a healthy baby without any complications, between 6 months and 3 years previously.

These practical considerations were twofold: (1) there was an ongoing study on sexual functioning after an uncomplicated delivery and (2) it offered the opportunity to ''casually'' obtain more or less ''disguised'' information about a subject that if it had been the main focus of attention, may have met with no response, or an exaggerated response or merely hilarity.

To obtain information relevant to answering the study questions, the target group of women were sent a questionnaire that comprised the following four parts (see Appendix A):

- demographic questions: age, partner relationship, education, etc.;
- medical background: mode of delivery, interval since delivery, pregnant now, breast feeding, etc.;
- current sexual functioning: evaluated with the aid of nine questions on sexual functioning (NSF) [14];
- importance attributed to the size and/or girth of the penis.

The answers to the questions were analysed with the SPSS, using direct summation, Pearson's product-moment correlations, Student's t-test and χ^2-tests.

3. Results

A total of 170 out of the 375 questionnaires were returned to us (response rate 45%). Population data are shown in Table 1.

Fig. 1 shows that 34 (20%) of the women found the length of the penis important and 1 (0.6%) found it very important. Ninety-four (55%) and 38 (22%) of the women found the length of the penis unimportant and totally unimportant, respectively. Opinions about the girth of the penis were very similar: 52 women (31%) found girth important and 3 (2%) found it very important; 82 (49%) found girth unimportant

Table 1
Total number of respondents, parity, pregnancy, mean age, mean interval since delivery and partner relationship

Respondents (total)	170	
Parity	153 primiparous	17 multiparous
Pregnant[a] (currently)	158 (no)	12 (yes)
Mean age (years)	30.4 (range 19–41)	
Mean interval since delivery (month)	15.7 (range 6–28)	
Steady relationship	168 (yes)	2 (no)

[a] At the time of the study.

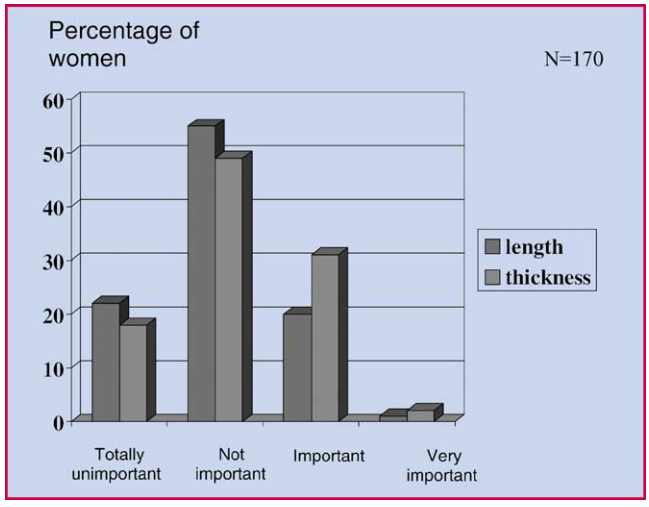

Fig. 1. The importance that women attribute to the size (length and thickness) of the penis.

and 30 (18%) found it totally unimportant. There was a moderate degree of correspondence between the importance attached to length and girth ($r = 0.71$; $p = 0.001$). Median subdivision into two groups (size important/unimportant, χ^2-test) did not reveal any significant differences in relation with demographic data. In an analysis on the correlation between opinions about the size of the penis and current sexual functioning (measured with the NSF) and sexual satisfaction, none of the results were statistically significant.

4. Discussion

This study addressed the importance women attach to the size of the penis and a possible association between their opinions about size and their sexual functioning.

Although many men worry about what they consider to be a too small organ, it appeared that only a minority of the women who participated in our study attached importance to the size of the penis: they considered length to be of less importance than girth: 21% and 32%, respectively. There was no difference in sexual functioning between the women who attached importance to the size of the penis and those who did not.

Conclusion: only a small minority of the respondents attached importance to the size of the penis. But, how much will the worried men (because it's all about them) be reassured by this finding? The conclusion might just as easily have been: one in three of the respondents found size important.

A few comments should be made. The fact that the response rate was only 45% means that we must proceed with caution. It is possible that this disappointingly low response rate in conjunction with an otherwise joyous, uncomplicated delivery is related to the confronting nature of the questions we asked [15]. No demographic data were available on the non-respondents. The population of women was highly selected. There was no difference in sexual functioning between the two groups (the size of the penis is/is not important), which argues in favour of the generalizability of the study outcome. At the very least we can conclude that a not inconsiderable proportion of the respondents considered the size of the penis to be of real importance. The answer to the question of why length seems to be of less importance than girth might lie in the fact that penile girth is more closely associated with the most important aspects of female sexual arousal. For instance, the greater the girth, the greater the degree of contact between the penis, the vagina and the clitoris, i.e. enhanced physiological satisfaction through enhanced stimulation. A larger penile girth may also contribute to a woman's feeling of ''fullness'' within the vagina and thus provide a higher level of psychological satisfaction.

Further research is required, preferably on a larger and less selected population, with attention to various other details. For example: what factors influence a woman's opinion? Is her opinion based on experience [16] or is it more a question of inexperience? Is anxiety involved? Do women feel that there is a relationship between the size of the penis and fertility?

We do not consider it likely that pregnancy and delivery had any influence on the women's responses or the study outcome. Based on evidence in the literature, we can assume that sexual relations will have been resumed, especially in a group of women 15.7 months after parturition [17–19]. However, pregnancy and parturition can affect sexual functioning; an increased frequency of dyspareunia has been mentioned as a major negative effect [20,21]. In this case we may expect an increase of the percentage of women who feel, that penis size is important. After all, if a woman is suffering from vulvar dysesthesia, penis size will matter a great deal, because it can be one of the factors that maintains the complaint [22].

A proportion of the men who apply for surgical penile lengthening admit that besides fear of sexual failure, they also have an inferiority complex in communal shower facilities, at the sauna, etc. We did not address this issue in the present study. Motivation for surgical intervention is firstly sexual and secondly depends on the extent to which the individual concerned considers that there is a relationship between the size of the penis and current sexual functioning. In the framework of the continuing discussions on penis enlargement operations, further research is required which also focuses on homosocial aspects. It would be worthwhile not only to include male and female attitude aspects, but also to take objective measurements of the penis. Knowledge about the amount of ''stretch'' available in the adaptive capacity of the vagina and also about the circumstances that determine the degree of stretch, would offer interesting research leads for one of the most common sexual complaints in women: pain during coitus.

5. Conclusion

Although clearly in the minority, a nevertheless considerable percentage of the women respondents attached substantial importance to the size of the male sexual organ.

Appendix A. Questionaire

A.1. General

1. How old are you?..... years.
2. Do you have a relationship at present?
   (a) no
   (b) yes, I have a steady partner
   (c) yes, but not a steady partner
3. What is the highest level of education you have a certificate for?
   (a) primary school
   (b) secondary school GCSEs
   (c) secondary school GCSEs and A-levels
   (d) lower vocational training
   (e) intermediate vocational training
   (f) higher vocational training
   (g) university
   (h) other, namely.....
4. Which description fits you best at present?
   (a) I have paid employment, namely.....
   (b) I am unemployed (receiving state benefit)
   (c) I am disabled (receiving state benefit)
   (d) I do not have paid employment (e.g. housewife, voluntary work)
5. Do you belong to a religious group?
   (a) no
   (b) yes, I am a roman catholic
   (c) yes, I am a protestant
   (d) yes, I am a member of the reformed church
   (e) yes, other namely.....
6. What is your ethnic background?
   (a) Dutch
   (b) Indonesian
   (c) Surinam
   (d) Antilles
   (e) Turkish
   (f) Moroccan
   (g) other, namely.....

A.2. Delivery

1. How long ago was the delivery?..... months.
2. How was your baby delivered?
   (a) spontaneously
   (b) caesarian section
   (c) vacuum extraction
   (d) forceps
3. Was this your first delivery?
   (a) yes
   (b) no
4. Procedures or complications during delivery
   (a) episiotomy (incision into the perineum)
   (b) tearing of the perineum
   (c) episiotomy and tearing
   (d) total rupture
   (e) perineum intact
5. How have you been feeding your baby?
   (a) breast feeding
      (1) yes..... months
      (2) yes, currently
   (b) bottle feeding
      (1) yes..... months
      (2) yes, currently
6. What form of contraception do you use?
   (a) none
   (b) the pill
   (c) IUD
   (d) other, namely.....

A.3. Sexual functioning

Please give one answer to each question by placing a cross in the appropriate box.

1. How often in the past month did you feel like having sexual contact? (Sexual contact = coitus, but also other forms of contact that you find sexually arousing).
   (a) not at all
   (b) once
   (c) a few times
   (d) once a week
   (e) a few times per week
   (f) once a day
   (g) a few times per day
2. How many times did you have sexual contact in the past month (sexual contact = coitus, but also other forms of contact that you find sexually arousing)?
   (a) not at all
   (b) once
   (c) a few times
   (d) once a week
   (e) a few time per week
   (f) once a day
   (g) a few times per day
3. How many times during the past month did your vagina not become as moist as you would have liked during sexual contact?
   (a) none
   (b) a few times
   (c) sometimes
   (d) frequently
   (e) every time

4. How many times during the past month did your vagina not remain moist for as long as you would have liked during sexual contact?
   (a) none
   (b) a few times
   (c) sometimes
   (d) frequently
   (e) every time

5. How many times did you reach orgasm during sexual contact in the past month?
   (a) none
   (b) a few times
   (c) sometimes
   (d) frequently
   (e) every time

6. How many times in the past month did it take you longer than you wanted to reach orgasm during sexual contact?
   (a) none
   (b) a few times
   (c) sometimes
   (d) frequently
   (e) every time

7. How many times in the past month did you reach orgasm faster than you wanted to during sexual contact?
   (a) none
   (b) a few times
   (c) sometimes
   (d) frequently
   (e) every time

8. How many times in the past month have you felt pain in your genital region during sexual contact? (Pain = pain, itching, burning, etc.).
   (a) none
   (b) a few times
   (c) sometimes
   (d) frequently
   (e) every time

9. To what extent are you satisfied with your current sex life?
   (a) very dissatisfied
   (b) dissatisfied
   (c) neutral
   (d) satisfied
   (f) very satisfied

10. I find the length of the penis:
    (a) very important
    (b) important
    (c) unimportant
    (d) totally unimportant

11. I find the girth of the penis:
    (a) very important
    (b) important
    (c) unimportant
    (d) totally unimportant

Please place a cross in the box beside the statement that best answers the question:

In comparison with before delivery, I find.....

12. my sex life:
    (a) much better
    (b) better
    (c) the same
    (d) poorer
    (e) much poorer

13. the sexual attraction of women:
    (a) much better
    (b) better
    (c) the same
    (d) poorer
    (e) much poorer

14. accessibility of my vagina:
    (a) much better
    (b) better
    (c) the same
    (d) poorer
    (e) much poorer

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