

relationship at the time of the operation were worst affected. The most common problem was lack of sexual arousal.

A frank preoperative discussion is essential, and the women's partner should be involved from the beginning. If at all possible, radiotherapy should be avoided in order to minimise the physical mutilation and to preserve the ovaries. At every follow up visit all women should be asked how their sexual life is progressing, and sexual counselling should be offered early to minimise long term damage.

### Discussion and management

Before an operation takes place it is essential to discuss with the woman, and preferably with her partner, the full implications of the operation on their sexual life. To allow the full expression of their fears, myths, gains, and losses, discussions should be conducted in private in a frank and empathic way. This helps to minimise sexual dysfunction after the operation.

Postoperatively, permission giving and the importance of starting sexual activity early should be emphasised. If a woman has had radiotherapy, oestrogen cream should be used in the vagina. Different positions for intercourse may have to be tried to lessen dyspareunia. Clinical depression should be treated first. When there are intrinsic difficulties with a relationship, the couple should be counselled by an appropriately trained person.

Before surgery, some couples may have chosen not to be sexually active, and this must be taken into account when discussing sexual activity before and after the operation. Good communication skills, especially good listening skills, are essential if a doctor is to show empathy, respect, and non-judgmental attitudes when discussing sexual issues with patients.

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The ABC of sexual health is edited by John Tomlinson, physician at the Men's Health Clinic, Winchester and London Bridge Hospital, and formerly general practitioner in Alton and honorary senior lecturer in primary care at University of Southampton.

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### Discussing the implications of a gynaecological operation

- Explain possible risks to sexuality
- Allow expression of fears, myths, gains, and losses
- Facilitate communication between partners
- Help to increase intimacy
- Genital sex is not the only form of sex
- Explore other forms of sex and intimacy
- Offer appropriate support



After an operation, different positions for intercourse may have to be tried to lessen dyspareunia. (Man and woman making love, from *Love* (1911) by Mihaly von Zichy)

### Further reading

Crowther ME, Corney RH, Shepherd JH. Psychosexual implications of gynaecological cancer. *BMJ* 1994;308:869-70.

### Help with sexual problems

A list of clinics and practitioners is available from the British Association for Sexual and Marital Therapy, PO Box 13686, London SW20 9ZH

### Correction

*ABC of sexual health: Management of sexual problems*

An error occurred in this article by Margaret Ramage (28 November, pp 1509-12). In the box listing useful guides (p 1509) the video series *Lovers' guides* is now available from Carlton Home Entertainment (telephone 0181 207 6207) rather than from Pickwick Video.

## One hundred years ago The spitting nuisance

Some time ago reference was made in the Journal to the steps which had been taken by the authorities of several cities in the United States to check the filthy and dangerous practice of spitting in public places. Since then similar prohibitions have been made in other parts of America, the most recent, as far as we are aware, being in the medical department of Columbia University, where not only spitting but smoking is forbidden in every part of the college precincts except in the retiring room and a designated part of the dissecting room. Smoking, say the university authorities, necessarily means expectorating, and the object of the ordinance is said to be the prevention of the spread of disease by means of sputa. We demur to the alleged constant

relationship between smoking and spitting, for your practised smoker has his salivary glands under control. We hold strongly, however, that no one in whom tobacco causes sialorrhoea should be permitted to exhibit his infirmity in public. Unseasoned smokers are not the only offenders but they are the worst, as the knifeboards of omnibuses and tramway cars and the railway carriages reserved for smokers only too plainly testify. But promiscuous expectoration is everywhere too much with us. The National Association for the Prevention of Consumption might well begin its crusade by making a determined effort to put down this abominable nuisance. (*BMJ* 1899;i:39)