

Discussion of Motivations, Expectations, and Experiences of Labiaplasty: A Qualitative Study

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Although labiaplasty and other ‘genital beautification’ procedures remain far less common compared to other aesthetic procedures, interest in these procedures raise a number of thought-provoking questions. Many individuals in the general public may intuitively wonder how someone becomes dissatisfied with the appearance of their genitals to the point that they consider and undergo surgical correction. Some of this wondering may be a byproduct of the number of ‘reality-based’ television programs that have shared the stories of women and men interested in these procedures. Even professionals within the aesthetic surgery community may wonder about the psychosocial status and functioning of a woman who expresses dissatisfaction with the appearance of her labiaplasty in an initial consultation.

This well written paper provides important information on the motivations and expectations of a small group of women who have undergone labiaplasty. As research on the motivations and psychosocial status of patients interested in aesthetic procedures has evolved over the past two decades, the field has moved away from interview studies of small groups of patients to the use of psychometrically valid measures of relevant domains of psychological functioning. However, in developing areas of research where little is known about specific groups of patients, interview-based studies can provide important, initial information on relevant psychological factors. The highest quality studies using qualitative methods include a structured analysis of the of the major themes heard across individual interviews. This approach, used in this study, differentiates methodologically sound research in the area from less rigorous, unstructured interviews of patients.

The paper highlights the role of internal as well as external motivations for labiaplasty. While many of the motivations for surgery were internal in nature, most were influenced by external events. The majority of women reported that they had experienced some negative comments about the appearance of the genitals from a sexual partner. Almost all women indicated that mass media exposure also impacted their decision making process around labiaplasty. With few exceptions, women reported that they had compared the appearance of their genitals to that of women seen in pornographic material. Almost all of the women also reported that they had used the mass media, either television programs or websites, as a source of education about the procedures.

Interestingly, most women reported that physical concerns about their genitals were a primary reason for seeking surgery. Some reported physical discomfort when engaging in physical activity, such as horseback riding, or when wearing tight clothing. Others also reported psychological discomfort related to the appearance of their genitals in certain types of clothing, such as bathing suits. Thus, while intuitive thought might suggest that women are most concerned about their labia when undressed, it

appears that their concerns are both physical and psychological in nature and actually intrude upon their normal, daily activity. Self-consciousness about a physical appearance characteristic when participating in activity that others might practice without a second thought is considered common and normative motivation for an aesthetic procedure.

Much of the concern around labiaplasty, and other aesthetic procedures of the genitals for both women and men, is the potential presence of body dysmorphic disorder. The disorder is typically seen in approximately 5-15% of aesthetic surgery patients (1). While not specifically investigated here, other reports have suggested that the features of the disorder may be common not only labiaplasty patients, but also individuals who seek other genital procedures (2,3). These issues warrant further study as well as clinical attention during the initial consultation and during postoperative care.

Another concern is the risk of surgical complications that can impact postoperative sexual functioning. In the present study, the self-reported complication rate was low and patients reported high levels of satisfaction with the procedure. However, women were not as uniform in their assessment of the impact the procedures on their sexual functioning. While sexual functioning is an important part of quality of life and body image, it is impacted by numerous physical and psychological variables (4). Thus, it may be unrealistic for women to expect profound changes in their sexual functioning after labiaplasty, no different than it is unrealistic to think that cosmetic breast augmentation will lead to significant changes in romantic and sexual relationships.

As the authors note, the study has revealed important observations about patients' motivations, expectations, and experiences that can be used to guide clinical interactions with labiaplasty patients. The next appropriate step for this line of research is a prospective, observational study of relevant psychosocial characteristics before and after labiaplasty. Results from that study will provide the most definitive evidence to date on the psychological benefits of these procedures.

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