

Everything you ever wanted to know about sex toys but were too afraid to ask...

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Background

My circle of friends, knowing that I work in what can only be called an 'interesting' profession, are rarely taken aback when I announce that I am going off to a conference about erectile dysfunction or researching a feature about loss of desire. But even they were taken aback when I mentioned that I was writing an article about sex products for the *Journal of Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care*. Winks and nudges aside, the general reaction was of amazement that such a highbrow periodical should have commissioned a piece about what can be viewed as such a lowbrow industry.

Why not sex toys?

Why such misgivings? The obvious reason, of course, is the 'sleaze factor'. Sex product outlets – be they brown-enveloped catalogues or high street shops – don't have a massively good reputation. Health professionals may simply not want to be associated with them – and many clients won't want to either. There's still a sense that logging on to a sex product website is the next best thing to visiting a porn website – and that's a turn-off in more ways than one.

And, yes, some outlets are near pornographic, and may therefore be promoting the very values that are causing a client's sexual problems in the first place. A website which suggests that every female should be instantly arousable is clearly going to be unhelpful to a postpartum woman whose desire levels have plummeted. Similarly, a catalogue which claims that every male can be a stud is obviously going to be inappropriate for a man suffering from spinal injury resulting in loss of sexual ability.

In particular, the heavy emphasis on penetration to be found in many sex product outlets can be off-putting both for male clients with erectile dysfunction, and female clients labouring under the misapprehension that if they don't climax through intercourse alone they are lacking. It is issues like these that make many health professionals wary of even mentioning sex products in the consulting room for fear they may be leading their clients into a minefield of unhelpful presuppositions.

And that's without the fear that they may be leading patients into a minefield of actively useless or even harmful merchandise that, I have to say, even the better-informed outlets can promote. The site that sells – and I quote – 'a potent, all-natural male power pill that delivers solid, longer-lasting erections, stronger orgasms and in some cases bigger penis size' may cause health professionals to giggle, but it may cause our more innocent clients to reach unadvisedly for the credit card.

Easing the atmosphere

Even so, having in recent months polled sex toy suppliers and health professionals alike, and trawled a number of

websites and catalogues to find out what's available, I do see an argument for sex toys having a place in the consulting room.

First, when done in the right way – and with the right client – simply introducing the concept of sex toys can be helpful. More than one health professional I consulted recalled a lightening of atmosphere, a lowering of tension when sex toys were mentioned in a consultation. Such discussions can decrease shame and embarrassment, both around specific sexual problems and around more general inhibition or loss of desire. Quite simply, sex toys can normalise the whole issue of sex, if only by allowing sniggers into what may otherwise be a session of unrelieved solemnity.

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Or of unrelieved medicalisation. Because in the course of defining, diagnosing and prescribing a client's problem, any sense of the pleasure of sex can be lost. Highlighting this concept by introducing the idea of sex toys can re-sexualise the situation and allow clients to remember that lovemaking can be pleasurable, enjoyable and just plain fun.

There's an additional point here when it comes to choosing a sex toy over parallel 'equipment' provided by the health service. Quite simply, sex toys are much more erotic than the medical equivalent: the pretty pink dilator kit, packaged up exotically and accompanied by a fun leaflet, is undeniably more attractive to use than the regulation white plastic version!

The toys themselves

Which brings us neatly to the core of the matter: the sex products themselves. I don't believe that we should endorse any particular one, which is why I'm not naming names in this article nor giving anything but the broadest recommendations (Box 1).

But sex toys themselves are undeniably useful to clients, and the health professionals I talked to outlined a number of ways. Most generally, a toy can give clients deeper, fuller and more wide-ranging sexual sensation than they are already experiencing. It can introduce variety into lovemaking, increase arousal for either partner, and help

Box 1: Who might recommend sex products in their practice?

- Sexual health educators
- Psychosexual therapists and couple counsellors
- Gynaecologists and gynaecological nurses
- Urologists
- Oncologists
- Health professionals dealing with the disabled
- Specialists in any medical condition that may lead to sexual dysfunction (e.g. diabetes, cardiac problems, multiple sclerosis)

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Box 2: Ways in which sex products may be clinically useful

- Adding extra lubrication or sensation (lubricants, stimulant gels)
- Increasing pelvic tone (vaginal balls, pelvic toner and exerciser)
- Enabling sexual activity for the disabled (vibrator, dildo)
- Teaching orgasmic skills (vibrator)
- Enabling erection (penis constriction rings, vacuum pump, Blakoe ring)
- Allowing clitoral stimulation during penetration (mini-vibrator, finger-fitting vibrator, penis ring with clitoral attachment)
- Aiding vaginismus or vaginal sensitivity (dilators, petite vibrators in increasing size)

clients redevelop sensuality perhaps in situations where sexual function is impaired.

Which toys might be useful here? Quite simply, whichever appeal to the couple concerned: massage oils, stimulating gels, feathers, vaginal eggs, anal beads, and so on. A useful way forward – and one which avoids recommendation – is to suggest that a client or couple logs on to a website or goes to a sex shop, explores a little and then comes back to the session to talk about what they've discovered.

Specific 'sex toys' can then help with specific sexual problems (Box 2); in particular, vibrators can be helpful for a range of issues such as anorgasmia. Here, our guidance needs to be much more directive: how to use, how not to use, what will help, what will hinder. The health professionals I spoke to pointed out that it's rarely a case of a client buying a sex toy and walking off into the sunset with it; instead they will often encounter embarrassment, resistance or simple lack of knowledge. So, as is the case with any therapeutic 'homework', we need to solicit feedback and to troubleshoot.

Getting information

Sex toy outlets can also be useful for the information that they provide. More and more – particularly accompanying the advent of the Internet – products themselves are supported by a plethora of information that may well educate the less well-informed client in the basics that often underpin their sexual problem.

The best outlets not only provide toys; they also provide support material to go with the toys. This might take the form of printed or web fact sheets; frequently asked questions (FAQs) giving information and reassurance; DVDs showing how toys can be used; telephone helplines; interactive advice services; workshops where issues can be discussed in a supportive environment; face-to-face advice and reassurance in high street shops, and so on. Of course, when badly done, these services are positively unhelpful; but, increasingly, they are run by qualified medical consultants or trained counsellors, expert in their field.

Yes, nothing can replace the one-to-one, face-to-face consultations that we professionals can offer. But bearing in mind the limitations on our time and resources, clients may need more general – and more widely available – information and support in their sex lives. The best outlets offer that.

We can work together

It is encouraging that the sex product industry is increasingly aware of us. Many actively consider our market and liaise with us when creating their products; one range of vibrators has even been developed in conjunction with (and is endorsed by) Relate. They are far more in touch with our market, taking stands at professional

Box 3: Criteria for judging an outlet

When checking out a sex product catalogue, website or shop consider the following:

- Is it supportive of both genders' sexual needs?
- Are its values helpful ones?
- Is the information or advice offered accurate and reassuring?
- Are its product claims substantiated?
- Are the experts credible and qualified?
- Are the products endorsed by a reputable organisation?

For a further checklist on ecological ethicality see www.drpetra.co.uk/blog/?p=429

conferences, running workshops through professional bodies, giving free samples so that we can judge effectiveness for ourselves, even offering discounts – though of course that must never veer into the realm of commission.

So I would argue – and no, I'm not on commission – that far from rejecting the sex toy industry as sleazy, we should be increasingly considering it as an adjunct to what we do. Yes, we should warn clients against outlets that we deem unhelpful in approach. Yes, we should make it clear that it is our support and counsel that they should heed first and foremost; the advice given through sex toy sites should never trump the advice we give. But where appropriate we should also give clients permission to explore the sex toy world, and to start distinguishing what works for them from what doesn't.

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And we ourselves should also be prepared to explore. We should browse sites and visit shops, learn about toys and what they do, become informed about the possibilities – and start making judgments about the services on offer. All the outlets acknowledged at the end of this article have indicated that they would be happy to hear from interested health professionals. As mentioned earlier, I don't and can't endorse any individual products or outlets: instead it is up to you to decide which approaches you are comfortable with and which best suit your and your clients' needs.

However, I believe the bottom line is this. The more we inform ourselves about the sex product industry and the more we encourage mutual dialogue, the more chance we have of influencing: of encouraging accuracy in information, professionalism in advice and support, rigor in offering only products that work – and an overall quality of service that both matches and complements our own.

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