

DYKE PSYCHE:

Lesbian Sex at Menopause - As Good Or Better Than Ever

by Esther Rothblum

"More pleasure than I ever experienced. More wisdom, and a fantastic lover."

The term menopause refers to the end of menstruation due to changes in ovarian functioning. Estrogen and progesterone levels decline, cycles become longer, and menstruation eventually ceases. Menopause is generally defined as at least 12 months of not having a menstrual cycle (though some women become menopausal instantly through having a hysterectomy or other gynecologic surgery). The average age of menopause is 51 years with the range extending from 48 to 53 for a woman's last period. Women tend to begin to notice changes in their menstrual cycle in their late thirties and forties. The terms "climacteric" or "perimenopause" refer to that time period, usually spanning several years, during which cyclic functioning of the ovaries is changing.

Nearly all research studies about sexual functioning and menopause assume that women's sexuality is intercourse-based and heterosexual. About a decade ago, Ellen Cole and I attempted to get a fuller picture of sex at menopause among lesbians. We developed a questionnaire designed to assess changes at menopause in sexual behavior and attitudes. We asked about menstrual history, partner characteristics, sexual behavior, changes in and quality of sexual activity, sexual problems, favorite sexual activities, sexual desire, sexual excitement, orgasm, pain with sex, sexual response of partners, and other perceived positive and negative changes in sexuality since menopause. Finally, we asked each respondent to complete the following sentence: "Based on my experience, sex at menopause is..."

Forty-one women responded to notices in local and national lesbian newspapers and to questionnaires distributed at two conferences. The average age of the women was 51.5 years, with a range from 43 to 68 years. One woman indicated her race/ethnicity to be Lebanese, the remainder were caucasian. All women indicated that they were lesbians, except one who was bisexual and two who did not in-

dicating sexual orientation. One said, "Lesbian at present, probably bisexual."

On average, the women had their last menstrual period just under five years ago, but the range was considerable; from two years to 41 years ago. Seven women (16%) had had a hysterectomy. Fourteen women (34%) were taking hormone replacement medication and one was taking homeopathic remedies.

All but nine women were currently engaged in sexual activity with other women. Frequency of sexual activity ranged considerably from 1-2 times daily to monthly or rarely.

Nineteen women (46%) stated that frequency of sexual activity had remained the same since the onset of menopause; six women (15%) stated that sexual activity had increased and eleven (27%) that it had decreased. We asked women if there had been a change in the type of sexual activity in which they engaged since menopause. Ten women (24%) indicated that there was. Positive changes included:

"More exploration - orgasms increased greatly as time went on; for me and for her. And the affection was almost constant - when we were together."

Some women also responded that there was less genital involvement and less deep kissing. One woman said she and her partner choose to only embrace and deep kiss now. Another woman said her changes have more to do with wisdom than hormones. Two other women indicated that they were more sexual since menopause, had more partners, and more quantity and quality of sexual activity.

We asked specifically whether there were kinds of sexual activity that women used to prefer but no longer do, or that they now enjoy but didn't prior to menopause. Twenty-nine women (71%) indicated that there was no change in the types of activities they had enjoyed since the onset of menopause. Of the twelve women (29%) who did notice a difference, comments included increased interest in rougher sex with penetration, ability to sustain orgasm for a longer period; increased hold-



ing, hugging, cuddling; increased sexual communication due to experiences with other women from previous relationships; more manual and genital sex; decreased time spent in sexual activity; and a greater focus on safer sex. Several women indicated that changes in their sexual activity were not necessarily related to menopause, but instead were due to such factors as "the timely mellowing of our relationship."

We asked specifically about the quality of women's sexual experience since menopause, including the level of enjoyment, pleasure, and satisfaction. We wanted to know how women explained these changes. Twelve women (29%) indicated no changes or no regular sexual activity. Eleven women (27%) indicated some decrease in perceived quality. Some comments included references to changes in physiology:

"Orgasms are not as intense as in the 20's and 30's and even 40's."

"Pleasure still the same but I hate not getting wet."

Other comments referred to possible negative consequences of hormone replacement therapy:

"I am having sex less often but it is probably a function of hormone therapy and not menopause."

Some women referred to their partner's sexuality as a contrast:

"Yes, it takes longer to be aroused. I desire more foreplay and tenderness during love making. I don't understand these changes. I am very disappointed in myself and feel guilty that my lover feels rejected (in) my lack of desire. Could have something to do with my feeling older and my worrying about losing my attractiveness."

There was a feeling of loss:

"Greater enjoyment in affection and quiet sensuality. Some regret at loss of passion and enjoyment that went with it." Twelve women (29%) expressed an increase in the quality of sex since menopause. Their comments indicated that sex was better and more fulfilling:

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