



Bettina Arndt

Are erection problems ruining your marriage?

It's the male sexual taboo that can destroy relationships and rob couples of a happy love-life. Yet erectile dysfunction needs to be discussed openly and with understanding, before it's too late, writes **Bettina Arndt**.

K EITH LIVED through a nightmare. He went from being a happily married man to a shaky soul who lost his wife, his marriage and much of his confidence. It all started three years ago when the 61-year-old man's sexual equipment began to fail. The couple had never had a problem before. "Our love life had been good, intuitive love-making, but largely without discussion." When Keith began to lose erections, he was utterly devastated and didn't know how to talk to his wife about it.

He couldn't discuss it, so he stopped going near her. "I withdrew from my wife. I wanted to make love to her, but I couldn't, so I put up an emotional wall. I wanted to go on being a good lover to her, but I didn't know how to do this without an erection."

Instead of going to bed together, he stayed up later and later watching

television. She'd lie in bed wondering why he wasn't interested in making love anymore: "Didn't he find her attractive? Was he having an affair?"

Keith acknowledges that he was so caught up with his own drama that he didn't give much thought to what his wife might be feeling. "Here I was torturing myself, but largely unaware of how deeply I was hurting my wonderful wife. I wasn't told until three years later that she had been equally devastated by the split in our relationship, that she had cried herself to sleep on countless occasions."

Eventually, she moved out into the spare bedroom and the couple is now divorced – their 20-year marriage ended because they didn't know how to tackle this common problem.

Huge numbers of couples are struggling with erectile dysfunction (ED), which affects 40 per cent of 40-year-olds, every second man in his 50s, 60 per cent of 60-year-olds and the numbers just keep climbing as men age. Yet it is so rare that

we talk openly about the profound impact of this problem on relationships.

We often find ourselves underestimating the demoralising effect of ED on a man's confidence and masculinity – particularly when it happens suddenly, for instance after prostate cancer treatment. Almost 20,000 Australian men are diagnosed with prostate cancer each year and most of them will suffer ED following treatments like surgery or radiation. Tackling ED is a major issue for most of these men – often their top priority once they know they have survived the cancer. Yet this important aspect of their rehabilitation is rarely taken seriously – how often have you heard people giggling over Viagra?

That's so different from the way we deal with a woman with breast cancer. When a woman suffers the loss of a breast through mastectomy, we understand what a blow that is to her confidence and sense of femininity, and we provide government support for breast ▶

reconstruction and prosthesis – as we should. Yet the man who loses the sexual functioning of his penis following prostate cancer treatment receives no government money for ED treatments and very little public acknowledgement of his plight.

Arguably, losing the sexual functioning of a penis is just as devastating as the loss of a breast. I recently completed research on male sexuality – published in the book, *What Men Want* – with 150 men and many of their partners writing for me about their sex lives. The men wrote about how they cope with their strong sex drives, why they use pornography, how they feel about women’s bodies, why they take such risks over sex – all about their secret delights, yearnings and pleasures. Yet the heart of the research project was about erections – how couples are coping in the age of Viagra. I deliberately included many older couples, including men who’d had prostate cancer treatments.

They made it very clear that erections really matter to men. “I feel like half a man,” wrote one man describing the shattering effect of ED. He had a loving marriage to a woman who loved sex as much as he did and made him have lots of sex in the weeks leading up to the prostate cancer surgery “in case things didn’t work afterwards”. Sadly, when he first wrote to me, none of the treatments was working for them.

“This is not living, it is just existing,” said another impotent man. There were some who maintained their sense of humour: “I’ve lost my best friend, even if

he was a dickhead,” one man quipped. Yet most found it very difficult indeed.

The good news is that most men with ED can now be helped. There is a range of effective treatments, which enable most men to regain erections. It was wonderful to hear from men thrilled to be able to get erections after years without them. Here’s a man who’d just tried Viagra: “The first time was amazing. It felt like I was 20 again. This is the best thing since sliced bread, but much dearer.”

And here’s a very happy man describing the use of an injection treatment: “Willy was up, ready to play for 45 minutes. Oh, what a feeling. Toyota!”

Yet many of their wives were far from pleased at the prospect of a new lease of sexual life. It’s common for older women to have lost interest in sex. My earlier research on mismatched desire showed that, once women settle into their relationships, many go for years with no spontaneous desire, with menopause often adding to the problem as loss of lubrication and thinning vaginal walls lead to painful intercourse.

“I deserve a rest,” one woman told me. There are many women who are delighted when their men shows signs of hanging up their spurs and are not at all happy when he comes home waving a Viagra script and wanting to leap back into the saddle. The sexually reluctant

“It felt like I was 20 again. This is the best thing since sliced bread, but much dearer.”

wife is one of the major reasons why men give up on ED treatments.

Women often fail to understand why sex means so much to men. The other day, I was giving a talk in a country town about these issues and an older woman came up to me and said, “I think

you’ve saved our marriage”. With tears in her eyes, she explained she’d never listened to her husband when he tried to explain it wasn’t just sex he craved, but the connection he felt through making love. Women tend to think it’s about getting their rocks off – “Oh, for goodness sake, go run around the oval or have a cold shower!” Yet men know they can masturbate for sexual relief. Their struggle is for physical intimacy, the joy of feeling wanted rather than constantly rejected.

Yet some men behave very badly when they regain their sexual youth, driving their partners crazy. Just when lovemaking shifts towards the more sensuous experience she’d always wanted, he regains firmer erections and wants to bonk all the time. The thrill of that erection can lead men to become very demanding and inconsiderate of their partner’s needs.

A few years ago, a woman wrote to Dear Abby, a US advice columnist, cursing Viagra and saying older wives shouldn’t be expected to have sex. Abby surveyed her readers and found the results were split down the middle, with half ▶

HOW TO FIND EFFECTIVE TREATMENT FOR ED

It isn’t easy to find the right ED treatment. Above all, stay away from shonky operators offering expensive treatments that don’t work. Everyone must have seen those dreadful billboards and heard radio ads promising longer, better sex. The company responsible, Advanced Medical Institute (AMI), last year made more than \$70 million preying on the fears of Australian men by

offering scientifically unproven treatments, such as nasal sprays. Consumer protection organisations regularly receive complaints from men who wasted thousands of dollars on ED treatments.

The lesson is never sign a contract for expensive ED treatments – all the proven treatments are available through GPs or proper doctors specialising in this area.

You are welcome to contact me through my website to find the right person (www.bettinaarndt.com.au).

Impotence Australia offers telephone counselling and referrals to good doctors working with ED. Phone 1800 800 614 or visit www.impotenceaustralia.com.au.

And, for more information on ED, go to www.andrologyaustralia.org.

saying these drugs were a godsend and others not wanting a bar of them. That's what I found, too. Some really wanted their sex life to continue – like the woman who wanted sex before the prostate cancer operation. Others had good reason not to want erections in their bed ever again.

One couple who took part in my research described a meeting with their urologist before the prostate cancer surgery. The doctor turned to the wife and said, "How do you feel about being poked?" He was a friend of the family – hence his casual language – but it was an important question. He was asking how *she* felt about intercourse, about erections. Would she mind if she never again had an erect penis in her marital bed? It turned out she was delighted at the prospect. She loved the idea of not having "this third person in the bed to rear up with its hard demands just when I was enjoying a cosy cuddle".

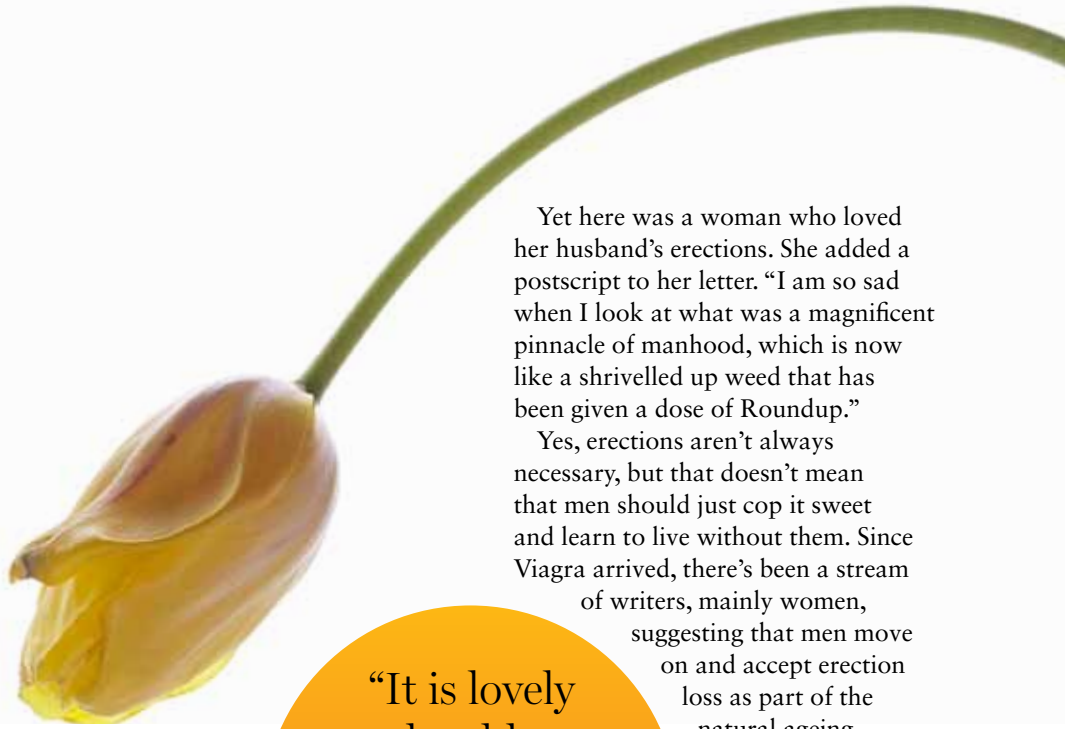
Here was a woman who had never climaxed in intercourse – she far preferred touching or oral sex. The doctor's clever question led the couple to talk honestly about all this and then decide to just enjoy "outercourse" and not use the erection treatments. They've never been happier. She's having the type of sex she always preferred and he's pleased she's now initiating sex and enjoying it so much more.

EVERY COUPLE IS different, which means they need to find their own way to deal with these changes in their love life. I had some women writing for me who were desperate to resume lovemaking, but their husbands just weren't interested. "I was a weeping mess most days. I felt so rejected, undesirable and unfeminine," said Katherine, whose husband's hormone therapy for prostate cancer led to low desire and erection failure. She's furious at the lack of help she received from doctors, including a female GP, who berated her for "not loving her husband enough and only caring about sex".

Finally, she found a doctor who helped them resume their sex life using Cialis, another of the ED tablets. "It is lovely to be able to be so close again, like a husband and wife should be," she wrote.

A woman who runs a prostate cancer supporters' group told me recently that she always has women in tears in her group. Even women who thought they were over sex are shattered at how unwanted and unattractive they feel if their partners won't come near them anymore. There are men who are so afraid of failing sexually that they retreat from all lovemaking and refuse to even talk about ED treatments.

Of course, it is possible to make love without an erection. I had one couple where medication for the man's heart condition was causing ED. He was still determined to make love to his wife. As she explained, "His affection and desire for me was truly beautiful and something I'll treasure always. It's hard to put into words what his gentleness and feather-like touches, kisses and cuddles did to me. It was, for me, a display of just how deeply he loved and wanted to be with me, and made me feel pretty special."



"It is lovely to be able to be so close again, like a husband and wife should be."

Yet here was a woman who loved her husband's erections. She added a postscript to her letter. "I am so sad when I look at what was a magnificent pinnacle of manhood, which is now like a shrivelled up weed that has been given a dose of Roundup."

Yes, erections aren't always necessary, but that doesn't mean that men should just cop it sweet and learn to live without them. Since Viagra arrived, there's been a stream of writers, mainly women, suggesting that men move on and accept erection loss as part of the natural ageing process. That makes perfect sense – from the female point of view. And there are men happy to do that. Yet there also are many men, and some women, who rejoice in the choices that are now available to keep men's tackle in good working order.

Apart from the pills, Viagra, Cialis and Levitra, there are injection therapies that work well for many men recovering from prostate cancer treatments. I know men pale at the thought of injecting their penis, which is why my research asked men what that feels like. Most said it wasn't a big deal, once they got used to it.

The research, published in *What Men Want*, provided detailed descriptions from older couples about their experiences with ED treatments, from pills to vacuum devices and even the amazing hydraulic penile implants, where a pump in the scrotum pumps up the erection. One wife said this makes a funny gurgling sound, which makes her giggle!

That's why I did this research – so couples know what it is like, to enable them to learn from the experiences of others and gain the knowledge they need to enjoy a second lease of sexual life. ■