



Time to get to the point

Bettina Arndt tells **Karen Hardy** why more hard talk is needed when it comes to men's erectile problems

Bettina Arndt's having a busy week. Her latest book was being launched, she was all over the news, and then to top it off, the National Press Club bumped her for some other woman who had been all over the news that week too, Julia Gillard. Arndt could be forgiven if sex was the last thing on her mind.

But sex is never far from Arndt's mind. That's what she does. It must be rather tiring, but then I remember her advice when her book *The Sex Diaries* came out last year, suggesting women should say yes more often. Men too, she says, if they are the ones rejecting their partners. But Arndt is upbeat, keen to chat, passionate about, well, passion so to speak, and what we should all be doing to find more of it in our lives. She's easy to talk to, but then has spent most of her working life getting people to talk to her. You can understand why people have shared their most intimate secrets with her for a good 35 years.

"Lots of people say when they write to me that they've never told anyone this," Arndt says. "What I find a little depressing, however, is that people don't seem to be getting any better about talking about sex."

"We like to think we're much more liberated than we were 30, 40 years ago, but I think a lot of people still have trouble talking about these matters." Arndt says she sometimes feels as though she's not getting very far, encouraging people to be more open about sex, but she's optimistic. "In a lot of ways we're better, parents are better at talking to their children, especially mothers, mums do a great job talking to their kids," she says. "But the sort of conversations you have with your children are only the start. It's the conversations that those young people then go on to have with each other and with their partners and with their doctor.

"Sex education in the home is better than it used to be, but there's still a lot of issues. When

people are having difficulty that's when it becomes hard." It's dealing with that particular difficulty – the business of not becoming hard – that concerns Arndt the most in this latest book, *What Men Want in Bed*. "It's the heart of the book," she says. She hopes that by putting erectile dysfunction out there it might encourage more men to talk about it, with their partners, with their doctors, and, at journey's end, governments too might start paying more attention.

At the press club, Arndt said the government had a responsibility to help prostate cancer sufferers afford the costs of treatment. Men and their partners must fight for the "right to an erect penis", she said.

She compares the scenarios of breast cancer patients with prostate cancer patients. "Why does our government treat male cancer victims so differently from women?" she wrote during the week.

"Women with breast cancer receive substantial government funding to help with the costs of





rehabilitation. Yet the 20,000 Australian men each year diagnosed with prostate cancer are given no funding for essential treatments necessary for their well-being.

“As far as the government is concerned, the loss of a functioning penis simply doesn’t rate compared to the loss of a breast.”

Arndt has copped a little flak over the discussion of pornography in the book.

“Pornography has become a very useful bogeyman that’s being blamed for all sorts of things,” she says. “I’m amazed how ready people are to blame it for all the problems that are emerging in our society.” She cites research from *The Porn Report*, a 2008 analysis on porn use from a group of Australian academics, that concluded that most of mainstream porn is largely free of violence and degradation. “Most of the research shows that non-violent sexual material does not have negative effects, and even with the violent material, the research is contradictory, with some showing violent porn consu-

mers do not have worse attitudes to women.” She says most of the men writing for her used pornography as a means of “keeping a lid on their sexual urges”.

“They’re often quite frustrated by the lack of sex in their relationships, and that’s frequently when they turn to pornography.

There’s also an interesting chapter “When he has the headache” which discusses a mismatched libido, looking at it from the male perspective. “Men with low sex drive are in the news,” Arndt writes. “There’s recently been a steady stream of articles and new books being published about sex-starved wives.

“All manner of theories are being proposed as to why these men may not be interested, from physical problems such as low testosterone, health issues like depression, distractions like affairs and, for a minority, a lifelong low drive.” She found, that among her diarists, there was a majority of “men who had a strong sex drive but gradually lost interest after years of grovelling” for sex.

“I’m supposed to be able to just turn it on like a tap,” writes one “but what about the fact that I was rejected as a man in the most basic way? When being interested in having sex with your partner was made to feel my fault? I thought that wanting to have sex with your partner, lusting after your wife was a good thing. Why should she be surprised that I would not be interested in something that has seemed to give her such little pleasure?” Arndt talks about the response that she got when *The Sex Diaries* came out last year. How people condemned the supposed idea that women needed to say yes more often.

“It’s not about women putting out for men or men putting out for women, it’s about the partner with the lower drive needing to think about what it’s like to constantly reject their partner.”

■ **What Men Want in Bed.** By Bettina Arndt. Melbourne University Press. 342pp. \$34.99.

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