

## Men in trouble over sex — the constant refrain

The 71-year-old virgin was a surprising volunteer for the sexuality project. As he expected, he didn't have that much to contribute to my research on male sexuality, but his story was intriguing. Here was a man who hadn't planned to miss out on sex and marriage but so wanted his first experience to be special that he'd waited for years hoping to meet the right woman. Despite plenty of dating, she never showed up. Hence, he'd ended up on his own, spending his whole life struggling with his strong sexual urges.

Yet he now wonders whether he has missed out on all that much. He wrote eloquently about watching his friends go through the pain of marriage break-up or struggling to cope without much sex in their marriages. "I'm not complaining. I've had a good life. There are no arguments in my household," he said chirpily. Certainly, no arguments about sex.

From the outside, life as a hot-blooded married heterosexual man doesn't look much fun. America's bestknown sex guru, Dan Savage, reaches much the same conclusion. The wildly popular advice columnist is currently in the news as a result of a thoughtful profile published in The New York Times that focused largely on Savage's attack on America's obsession with fidelity.

Openly gay Savage, whose sex advice column is syndicated across the world in more than 70 newspapers and attracts millions more followers online, started off jokingly offering heterosexuals sex advice but quickly attracted a huge following with his hard-hitting, provocative take on bedroom manners and responsibilities.

He promotes mutual care-taking, suggesting both men and women adhere to his famous acronym GGG — all lovers should be good, giving and game. He writes at length about the relationship between low libido and monogamy. "You can have strict monogamy, or you can have low libido, Ladies, but you can't have both." But then he adds. "Oh, and guys? You need to accept those tide-you-over blowjobs and hand-jobs just as cheerfully as she gives them." That's if she gives them.

When New York Times interviewer Mark Oppenheimer suggested Savage's views are tainted by the American gay male view of the sexual world, with its tolerance for pornography, fetishes and a variety of partnered arrangements, Savage responded that the male gay world simply expresses what men are really like when they don't have women reining them in. "Women, straight women, are in relationships with men. Doesn't it help to know what we're really like? Women can go on marrying and pretending that their boyfriends and husbands are Mr Darcy or some rom-com dream man. But where's that going to get them? Besides divorce court?"

That's where he is wrong. Faced with the misery of a lifetime spent dealing with the frustrations of monogamous sex-starved marriage, most men don't leave. On my website forum, I once had a letter titled "Do I stay or do I go" from a 40-year-old married man who'd gone for years without any sex in his marriage. The letter attracted hundreds of responses, many from men urging him to go. He left, for a while, but then came back and struggled on, trying to make his marriage work. Like most men who write to me, he loves his wife and children and feels he has too much to lose if he leaves.

Dan Savage is right in thinking that many heterosexual men share the same voracious sexual desires that have come to define gay male sexuality. But most are doing an incredibly good job keeping a lid on them. Men come in for constant criticism about sex. We hear endlessly about the men who stray, the men who harass women or make inappropriate sexual remarks, men caught looking at women in

the wrong way, or in trouble for gazing at naked bodies on the Internet. But what we never hear about is men's restraint, the remarkable stoicism of current generations of heterosexual men who cop it sweet, despite their immense frustrations.

Some time ago The Sunday Age published a sweetly amusing story about men's sexual fantasies, written by a man who describes himself as a "respectable, married" man who has spent the last few years taming what he calls his "inner goat". There's no place for hidden sexual yearnings in his proudly reconstructed world — he boasts he keeps his goat firmly locked inside a concrete pen, tethered to a post. Yet he ruefully acknowledges that sometimes it manages to escape and he finds himself mentally undressing a woman as she walks past.

The online responses to his article were intriguing — the men who applauded his courage and the women who condemned him for expressing such thoughts. "Men, you could put your minds to much better use than fantasising about women you are never going to get ... There's something you can do: you can respect women and learn to control your pathetic, primitive minds. Meditation helps," wrote one smug woman.

A male responder hit the nail on the head, summing up what's happened here: "While the feminists and soft men like to kid themselves that they are changing our nature, all they've really done is teach men to keep their mouths shut, while our minds still explore exactly the same topics they always have."

There's an interesting book — The Testosterone Files — written by a feminist writer who had a sex change and became a male. The author, Max Wolf Valerio, describes being blown away by the urgency of his newly acquired sexual urges, his constant sexual fantasies — sex is now food, he says. He cringes when he sees female audiences on talk shows pursing their lips, shaking their heads at sheepish male guests who are supposed "porn addicts" or "womanisers". He's shocked by women's ready assumption of moral superiority.

"How to explain this to women?" Valerio ponders. "There is this thing about men that they cannot completely know. Few people want to believe that there could be a real chasm, a chemically induced difference of sexual drive between the sexes. Few want to believe that there might be any difference at all that is not socially constructed.

"Now that I am Max, I see that this rift, this fundamental chasm between men and women's perceptions and experience of sexuality, is one that may never be bridged.

"There certainly can be no hope for understanding as long as society pretends that men and women are really the same, that the culture of male sexuality is simply a conflation of misogyny and dysfunction. That the male libido is shaped and driven primarily by socialisation, that can be legislated or 'psychobabbled' out of existence."

The strong male libido remains, even if the inner goat now must remain firmly tethered. Men live with up to 20 times the testosterone of women and that makes it very tough to cope with decades of monogamous marriage, particularly when sex is offered very reluctantly — "like meaty treats to a dog", as one man put it.

Yet most men are doing a remarkable job remaining true to their women. For all the talk about unfaithful men, most married men succeed at monogamy most of the time. Just look at the statistics. The first Sex in Australia Survey, also known as the Australian Study of Health and Relationships or ASHR1 (2003), sampled almost 20,000 people and found just five per cent of

partnered men had strayed in the previous year. Now admittedly, these tiny numbers can add up over a long marriage or relationship, but while there are men who are compulsive philanderers, this wasn't the case for most of the men taking part in my research who admitted to having had an affair.

The overwhelming majority wanted to be faithful and were succeeding, even though there may have been a lapse along the way — a one-night stand at a conference, a few weeks of illicit pleasure, or even an affair lasting months or perhaps a year or two. But nothing compared with the many years of restraint.

In one of Dan Savage's amusing Q&A sessions with college students now available on YouTube, he argues men should get credit for this. "If you are with a guy for 40 years and he cheats on you three or four times, he is GOOD at monogamy! Not BAD at monogamy. We think of monogamy the way we think of virginity — it exists until you f--- someone and then it's gone forever. We need to think of monogamy the way we think of sobriety — you can fall the f--- off the wagon and still get back up."

Men's well-known urge for sexual variety has long been acknowledged by psychologists who refer to it as the "Coolidge effect". The name comes from a story about former US president Calvin Coolidge and his wife visiting a poultry farm. During the tour, Mrs Coolidge noticed roosters mating frequently and inquired how often that happened. The farmer proudly explained that his roosters performed their duty dozens of times each day.

"Perhaps you could point that out to Mr Coolidge," replied the first lady.

On being told, the president asked the farmer, "Does each rooster service the same hen each time?"

"No," replied the farmer, "there are many hens for each rooster."

"Perhaps you could point that out to Mrs Coolidge," replied the president.

All the evidence suggests the urge is hardwired — yet most men find ways of ignoring that itch, or diverting it into harmless pursuits like looking at pornography.

Harmless pursuits? That's not, of course, how porn is presented. We are subject to an endless stream of people, mainly women, warning of the dangers of porn. Witness British sociologist Gail Dines, who appears on television panels and at writers' festivals describing in the most salacious terms the horrors of gonzo porn — gagging women, women whose anuses "literally drop off their bodies because of anal prolapses". She claims that mainstream porn invariably dehumanises women and normalises male sexual cruelty.

Yet the truth is when men sit in the wee hours staring at their flickering computer screens, the big attraction is willing women, eager women, easy women — easy to bed and easy to please. "Images of women hungry for sex with us, possessed by desire for us. Receptive women who greet our sexual desire not with fear or loathing but with appreciation, even gratitude," wrote David Steinberg in an essay relating sexual scarcity to the male attraction for porn.

A research study looking at porn usage in Australia, published in The Porn Report, found most (98 per cent) of the best-selling porn videos are pretty white-bread and free of violence — in fact, some of the most popular mainstream Internet sites are DIY amateur sites where thoroughly ordinary couples bonk for their webcams. My research suggests men turn to porn for good reasons: as a harmless outlet for their sexual curiosity; to control a sexual drive causing conflict in their relationships; to relieve sexual boredom; and as relief from the tensions of trying to please women in real-life sex.

There are, of course, high-drive women who struggle to live with their own rampaging inner doe. There are many such single women but far fewer in long-term relationships. There are also those who enjoy watching porn, who cheerfully spend Friday nights with their partners munching take-away and watching R-rated DVDs. Women who happily live in open relationships, or go swinging with their partners, or post their own beaver shots on Internet sites. And there are women genuinely concerned about their partners' frustrations. It's just that these women rarely enter the public debate.

I recently received an email from a 60-year-old woman talking about her "fabulous, amazing, caring, awesome, loving" husband who keeps harassing her to get involved in threesomes and group sex. She's an intelligent, thoughtful woman who is perplexed about how to negotiate this difference in their attitudes. "There is, I believe, a big difference between 'just saying yes' within the confines of a marriage and agreeing to sexual arrangements that simply fly in the face of everything that you believe that sex is about."

Her husband grew up in a very liberal sexual environment and had previously enjoyed open relationships. He's convinced his desire for sexual experimentation is perfectly natural, but it holds no attraction for her. After much persuasion, she participated in a threesome with a male friend yet the pressure continues, with her husband seeking further get-togethers with other males and even sending a photo of her (clothed) to a potential partner. Naturally she was upset by this, but rather than rant about his behaviour, she wrote seeking simply to illustrate the difficulties of negotiating this divide between men and women.

I suggested she post the letter on my website forum, to generate discussion on this difficult issue. It attracted an immediate response from an angry woman: "NOBODY, and I mean NOBODY (not even hubby) has the right to pressure you into doing anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. A person who does this is not respecting OR loving his/her partner," she wrote, tearing strips off the man for his unseemly behaviour. "If that was my husband, and he continued to harass me over this, it would be grounds for separation and divorce. Red flags going off all over the place for me," she added emphatically.

Naturally that served to shut off any real discussion. Few men would dare venture an opinion after such a tirade. That's what happens all the time. Whenever anyone, man or woman, talks openly about how to accommodate male sexual desire, angry women close down the conversation. It strikes me as odd.

Of course, women have a right to say no to such activities, but shouldn't men have freedom to ask? Is it so very different from other areas where women feel perfectly free to try to persuade men into life-changing decisions — like buying a bigger house (involving him in an extra decade or two of mortgage payments) or persuading a new husband, a remarried father, to have more children?

A few years ago, the Australian National University's Women's Studies students held a demonstration protesting about a talk I was giving at their university. They objected to me even raising questions about sexual obligation in marriage, suggesting such talk is dangerous for young women.

What nonsense. Closing down the debate on the vexed business of accommodating male and female sexual needs doesn't solve anything. This is mighty tough stuff but it's a conversation we must continue.