Sexual pleasure and wellbeing policy

In line with the World Health Organization (WHO), FPA believes the ability to choose to have pleasurable and safe relationships is fundamental to the fulfilment of people’s sexual rights.¹

What do we believe?

1. All people have the right to be acknowledged as sexual beings if they choose.

2. Sexual pleasure is central to sexual health and wellbeing.

3. All people should have access to high-quality support and treatment in order to achieve fulfilling sexual lives.

4. Self-esteem, confidence and communication skills are the key to healthy, pleasurable sexual relationships.

5. Pleasure should be discussed as a part of high-quality, age-appropriate relationships and sex education (RSE).

Why we believe this

1. All people have the right to be acknowledged as sexual beings if they choose.

Sex and sexuality are central parts of people’s lives and it’s vital that everyone is able to access the information, education and services they need to make informed choices about their sexual health and their relationships, including choosing whether and when to have sex and who to have sex with.

Discussions around sexual health often only focus on prevention of infection and unplanned pregnancy, which are necessary but can be negative if they exclude acknowledgement or discussion of sexual pleasure. Sexuality is not merely a vehicle for reproduction and people should be able to enjoy their sexuality as a fundamental aspect of their wellbeing.

¹ WHO, Defining Sexual Health, 2006
FPA recognises that for some people, sexuality is marginalised or ignored. This can be the case for older people or people with disabilities or long-term illnesses. In addition, media portrayals of sexuality are almost exclusively focused on young, non-disabled people. FPA wants to help establish a society in which everyone can enjoy their sexual health free from prejudice and harm.

FPA is committed to promoting greater recognition and acceptance of the variety of ways in which people express their sexuality. Equally, we encourage recognition and acceptance of everyone’s right to express and enjoy their sexuality regardless of ability, age, gender, race, sexual orientation, religion or culture.

2. **Sexual pleasure is central to sexual health and wellbeing.**

An open and honest culture, in which sexuality is accepted and celebrated, benefits individuals, strengthens relationships and fosters an open and tolerant society.

On an individual level, sex and sexual pleasure have been shown to be beneficial to physical and mental health. Studies demonstrate that sexual activity may be beneficial to the immune system, while relationships and touching may lower blood pressure, improve sleep and decrease stress. A study of heterosexual, monogamous couples found that open communication about sex leads to higher satisfaction in relationships.

3. **All people should have access to high-quality support and treatment in order to achieve fulfilling sexual lives.**

Unfortunately, often due to stigma and shame, not everyone feels able to access help when their sexual lives are not fulfilling. Often people are dealing with common problems; research based on the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles found that 41.6% of men and 51.2% of women reported one or more problems in the previous year. The same research also found low sexual

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2 Charnetski C, and Brennan F, *Sexual Frequency and Salivary Immunoglobulin A (IgA),* Psychology Reports, 94:3, 2004
3 Grewen K, Anderson B, Girdler S and Light K, *Warm partner contact is related to lower cardiovascular reactivity,* 2003
4 Brody S, *Blood pressure reactivity to stress is better for people who recently had penile-vaginal intercourse than for people who had other or no sexual activity,* Biological Psychology. 71:2, 2006
function is associated with depression, being unhappy in a relationship and inability to talk easily about sex with a partner.

Following reductions in budgets for public health, some local authorities have stopped commissioning psychosexual services through community sexual and reproductive health clinics. FPA believes sexual dysfunction and psychosexual services should be seen as an integral part of sexual health service provision and be funded and supported.

We also recognise that, in many cases, people’s sexual health needs are not considered when they receive health or social care, for example when they enter residential care or go into hospital.

Clear pathways for treatments including medication and counselling should be in place and healthcare professionals should be trained to be aware of how to refer or signpost people to specialist services if these are necessary.

As such, FPA welcomes professional guidance such as the Royal College of Nursing’s guideline on sexuality and intimate relationships in care homes, which supports individuals’ sexual expression and makes it clear that staff should be offered support and appropriate education for dealing with issues of sexuality, intimate relationships and sex, in a non-discriminatory manner.

4. **Self-esteem, confidence and communication skills are the key to healthy, pleasurable sexual relationships.**

5. **Pleasure should be discussed as a part of high-quality, age-appropriate relationships and sex education (RSE).**

Sex is different for everyone; different people enjoy different things, and what people find pleasurable can change over time. This is why communication skills are important; to have a healthy, pleasurable sexual life with a partner, people need to be able to communicate their needs and listen to the needs of their partner.

However, for many people, talking about sex with a partner can be difficult. This could be for a number of reasons, such as general stigma around sexuality, low body confidence or fear of upsetting a partner.

FPA believes that communication skills should be a key part of statutory, comprehensive relationships and sex education (RSE). Research undertaken as part of Brook’s Good Sex Project shows the importance of working with young 

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7 RCN, *Older people in care homes: sex, sexuality and intimate relationships*, 2011
people to understand sexual pleasure. FPA believes that RSE should equip young people to enjoy sex and relationships that are based on qualities such as mutual respect, trust, negotiation and enjoyment, which cannot be done without a discussion about sexual pleasure.

Research also shows that promoting pleasure is helpful in encouraging safer sex. If people are aware of when they are putting themselves at risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancies and how to minimise these risks, they can make informed choices. Using a suitable method of contraception can help people feel more confident which can improve their chances of enjoyment.

Related FPA resources
- FPA: Policy Statement on relationships and sex education policy statement
- FPA: Policy Statement on older people

Additional reading
- World Health Organisation: Defining Sexual Health
- Reproductive health matters: Pleasure and prevention: when good sex is safer sex
- Royal College of Nursing: Older people in care homes: sex, sexuality and intimate relationships

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8 Brook, Good Sex Project, 2012
9 Reproductive Health Matters, Pleasure and prevention: when good sex is safer sex, 2006

FPA Policy Statement: Sexual Pleasure and Wellbeing, 2019