Heterosexual Chinese Women's Sexual Adjustment After Gynecologic Cancer

Catherine So-kum Tang  
Bik-Ngan Siu  
Florence Duen-mun Lai  
Tony K.H. Chung

Department of Psychology, Chinese University of Hong Kong

Studies on the sexual adjustment of Hong Kong Chinese women who have gynecologic cancer are reviewed. The findings suggest that sexual beliefs based on the Confucian and Taoist traditions still prevail in contemporary Chinese societies and influence Chinese sexual attitudes and behavior. Chinese women show decreased sexual activities, interest, drive, and satisfaction after gynecologic cancer and its treatment. The sexual morbidity rates are around 30-50%, but marital relationships are minimally affected. We recommend that researchers examine the impact of cultural factors to clarify how women from different cultures experience gynecologic cancer and its treatment.

The number of individuals who have cancer has increased rapidly over the past decades, but the prognosis in cancer illness has also improved (American Cancer Society, 1988). As a result of these changes, increased attention is paid to the psychosocial adjustment of these individuals following the diagnosis, treatment, and recovery of cancer, and sexual outcomes are among the major concerns (Anderson & Wolf, 1986; Beckham & Goding, 1990; Weijmar Schultz, van de Wiel, Hahn, & van Driel, 1992; Wise, 1983). All cancer affects body image and self-concept and thus has the potential to diminish sexual functioning (Andersen & Jochimsen, 1985; Andersen & LeGrand, 1991; Bellerose & Binik, 1993; Derogatis, 1986; Mock, 1993). In particular, studies have shown that gynecologic cancer can produce profound psychosexual impact on women's lives (Andersen, Anderson, & deProsse, 1989; Horton, 1991; Weijmar Schultz, Bransfield, van de Wiel, & Bouma, 1992).

Authors of review articles on the sexual adjustment of women who have gynecologic cancer found that the sexual morbidity rates range from 37-49% after the diagnosis and before treatment for early stage cervical or endometrial cancer, but they rise substantially to 40-90% following treatment for invasive cervical cancer (Andersen et al., 1989; Horton, 1991; Weijmar Schultz et al., 1992; Weijmar Schultz, van de Wiel, Bouma, & Lappohn, 1991). Sexual rehabilitation of these women also depends upon the method of treatment, and few studies have provided conclusive statements regarding the long-term differential effectiveness of radical hysterectomy, radiotherapy, or combined treatment (Weijmar Schultz et al., 1991, 1992). Important psychosocial predictors of post-treatment sexual health include the magnitude of surgical intervention (Andersen et al., 1989), pretreatment sexual interest (Horton, 1991), age and lengthy stable relationships (Corney, Everett, Howells, & Crowther, 1992), and partner-related factors, such as availability, attitude, and health (Burbie & Polinsky, 1992; van de Wiel, Weijmar Schultz, Would, & Bouma, 1990).

Social scientists and anthropologists have indicated that each culture has unique sexual beliefs that affect the sexual expression of its people (e.g., Gregersen, 1986; Unwin, 1994). Specific forms of culture-bound sexual problems are found across cultures (Bhugra & de Silva, 1993; Mo, Chen, Li, & Tseng, 1995), suggesting that cultural beliefs may be responsible for the genesis and perpetuation of these problems. Cultural beliefs that associate femininity and sexuality with female reproductive organs will determine the significance women and their partners attach to their genital organs, which will, in turn, influence their sexual adjustment following the diagnosis and treatment of diseases of these organs. At present, the majority of studies on the sexual adjustment of women with gynecologic cancer are based on Euro-American samples, and very little is known about women with similar conditions in other countries. In the current literature review, we attempted to fill this knowledge gap and evaluated the studies on the sexual adjustment of Hong Kong Chinese women with gynecologic cancer in terms of the impact of Chinese culture.

Cultural Sexual Beliefs in Contemporary Chinese Societies

There is a paucity of information on Chinese sexual behavior, and well-controlled empirical studies are particularly lacking. Available studies on this topic suggest that, despite rapid social changes and influences from Western countries, traditional Chinese sexual beliefs still persist in contemporary Chinese societies such as China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. These cultural beliefs often

Address correspondence to Catherine So-kum Tang, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, NT, Hong Kong.