

A Preliminary Investigation of Changes in Sexual Relations
Following Stroke

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Those of us who are involved directly with aphasic patients in recovery of language usually provide counselling to the spouses. It is not unusual, at least in the Houston VA Hospital, for wives to volunteer information about personal matters and concerns. Perhaps speech pathologists are the initial confidants because ward physicians are concentrating on physical aspects of the patient's recovery while social workers and psychologists enter the rehabilitation program only when the ward physicians either begin discharge planning or initiate requests for their services. Actually, stroke patients in the Houston VA Hospital may be admitted to the Neurology Ward, transferred to Rehabilitation Medicine Wards, then transferred to the Nursing Home Care Unit subject to intervention by different social workers and psychologists in each setting, but the same speech pathologist throughout.

In individual counselling sessions, occasionally a wife would speak of changes in sexual relations following her husband's stroke. The subject usually was not broached by the speech pathologist, however, so the incidence of changes and effect on the wives were not known. Realizing that tensions of the marriage in many areas have negative effects on rehabilitation, including language, inquiry into this particular area appeared advisable. We decided to ask the wives of all currently enrolled patients to participate in our investigation of changes in sexual relations. Having established rapport with the wives in recent group conferences, we were confident of their assistance.

A review of the literature provided little information specific to our population. Approaches to sexual adjustments in spinal cord injury patients continue to receive prominence, for example, the increasing number of Sexual Attitude Reassessment Workshops (1975). Ullman (1962) anticipated that trends in sexual interests and activities would be as varied in the stroke population as in the general population of 70,80, and 90 year olds. He considered the most frequent change to be impotence despite continued desire. McKenzie Buck (1968) associated reduction of sexual drive in aphasics with deficits in emotional concentration and limited memory span. He emphasized that "most patients eventually regain their sex drive, but initially they

lack concern for the satisfaction of their partner and this can repel and produce conflicts." Buck deplors the fact that maladjustments in sexual relationships discussed in the psychiatric and psychological literature make no reference to the frustrations experienced by the spouses. He advises the speech pathologist to acquire medical information from the physician and permission to discuss the subject with the mate. An opposite finding, according to Sarno and Sarno (1969) is that occasional patients have increased desire for sex after stroke.

Our purpose was to determine by means of a questionnaire first, whether or not changes existed in sexual relationships after stroke in our aphasic population from the wife's point of view. Second, we wanted to know if changes were of concern to the wife.

This is the questionnaire we devised. (Figure 1)

Eighteen wives responded to the questionnaires, 13 by mail and 5 during personal interview. The wives ages ranged from 32 to 62 with educational backgrounds from the eighth grade to college degrees. The time post onset for the patients ranged from 3 months to 2 years. All hospitalized patients had had weekend passes home.

One questionnaire was returned marked only unconcerned. One was returned incomplete with a note stating, "there has been no sexual relationship, husband unable." Total responses to the remaining 16 questionnaires were compared. (Figure 2) Responses to each question, as noted by asterisks, were compared with responses to the remaining questions in Figures 3 - 10. Two wives wrote comments on their questionnaires.

One stated that her husband was greatly concerned that the relationship was less satisfactory than before and less frequent than before. She, however, checked "slightly concerned," explaining "time, I believe, heals most problems." The second wife expressed her feelings concerning early frustration, then resignation, attributing the changes to her husband's health. She concluded with the statement, "I might add that no doctor has ever mentioned to me whether sex should be encouraged or discouraged. Neither have I asked."

In summary, from our questionnaire, we found that the sexual relationship was less satisfactory in 13 of 16 cases or 81% and the frequency changed in 14 of 16 cases or 87%; of these 14, 2 were more frequent and 12 were less frequent. Eight or 50% of the wives reporting expressed some degree of concern about the changes.

Further and more specific study of the problem should correlate findings with time post onset, severity of aphasia, and specific etiology. Changes in sexual behavior over time would be of interest. Whether or not changes in aphasic patients differ from changes as a result of other catastrophic illnesses might be determined.

Supportive counselling directed toward re-adjustments is essential, whether it be by the speech pathologist, social worker

or psychologist. With the incidence of strokes increasing in the younger population, knowledge of changes must be acquired and utilized to facilitate total maximum rehabilitation potential.

Figure I

1. We are trying to do a research study. The results should help us with our counseling sessions with wives. We are not interested in names. DO NOT SIGN

2. Please check the statements which best describe you and your husband's sexual relations now as compared with those before his stroke.
 1. Is the relationship satisfactory to each of you?
_____ a.) More satisfactory than before.
_____ b.) The same as before.
_____ c.) Less satisfactory than before.

 2. Is the frequency of your sexual relations:
_____ a.) More than before.
_____ b.) The same as before.
_____ c.) Less than before.

 3. Are you (the wife) concerned about the sexual relationship?
_____ a.) Greatly concerned.
_____ b.) Slightly concerned.
_____ c.) Unconcerned.

Figure II

2. Please check the statements which best describe you and your husband's sexual relations now as compared with those before his stroke.

1. Is the relationship satisfactory to each of you?

- | | |
|-----------|------------------------------------|
| _____ | a.) More satisfactory than before. |
| <u>3</u> | b.) The same as before. |
| <u>13</u> | c.) Less than before. |

2. Is the frequency of your sexual relations:

- | | |
|-----------|-------------------------|
| <u>2</u> | a.) More than before. |
| <u>2</u> | b.) The same as before. |
| <u>12</u> | c.) Less than before. |

3. Are you (the wife) concerned about the sexual relationships?

- | | |
|----------|-------------------------|
| <u>4</u> | a.) Greatly concerned. |
| <u>4</u> | b.) Slightly concerned. |
| <u>8</u> | c.) Unconcerned. |

Figure III

2. Please check the statements which best describe you and your husband's sexual relations now as compared with those before his stroke.

1. Is the relationship satisfactory to each of you?

- | | |
|----------|------------------------------------|
| _____ | a.) More satisfactory than before. |
| <u>3</u> | b.) The same as before.* |
| _____ | c.) Less satisfactory than before. |

2. Is the frequency of your sexual relations:

- | | |
|----------|-------------------------|
| <u>1</u> | a.) More than before. |
| <u>2</u> | b.) The same as before. |
| _____ | c.) Less than before. |

3. Are you (the wife) concerned about the sexual relationships?

- | | |
|----------|-------------------------|
| _____ | a.) Greatly concerned. |
| _____ | b.) Slightly concerned. |
| <u>3</u> | c.) Unconcerned. |

Figure IV

2. Please check the statements which best describe you and your husband's sexual relations now as compared with those before his stroke.
1. Is the relationship satisfactory to each of you?
 a.) More satisfactory than before.
 b.) The same as before.
 13 c.) Less satisfactory than before.*
 2. Is the frequency of your sexual relations:
 1 a.) More than before.
 b.) The same as before.
 12 c.) Less than before.
 3. Are you (the wife) concerned about the sexual relationship?
 4 a.) Greatly concerned.
 4 b.) Slightly concerned.
 5 c.) Unconcerned.

Figure V

2. Please check the statements which best describe you and your husband's sexual relations now as compared with those before his stroke.
1. Is the relationship satisfactory to each of you?
 a.) More satisfactory than before.
 1 b.) The same as before.
 1 c.) Less satisfactory than before.
 2. Is the frequency of your sexual relations:
 2 a.) More than before.*
 b.) The same as before.
 c.) Less than before.
 3. Are you (the wife) concerned about the sexual relationship?
 1 a.) Greatly concerned.
 b.) Slightly concerned.
 1 c.) Unconcerned.

Figure VI

2. Please check the statements which best describe you and your husband's sexual relations now as compared with those before his stroke.
1. Is the relationship satisfactory to each of you?
_____ a.) More satisfactory than before.
2 b.) The same as before.
_____ c.) Less satisfactory than before.
 2. Is the frequency of your sexual relations:
_____ a.) More than before.
2 b.) The same as before.*
_____ c.) Less than before.
 3. Are you (the wife) concerned about the sexual relationship?
_____ a.) Greatly concerned.
_____ b.) Slightly concerned.
2 c.) Unconcerned.

Figure VII

2. Please check the statements which best describe you and your husband's sexual relations now as compared with those before his stroke.
1. Is the relationship satisfactory to each of you?
_____ a.) More satisfactory than before.
_____ b.) The same as before.
12 c.) Less satisfactory than before.
 2. Is the frequency of your sexual relations:
_____ a.) More than before.
_____ b.) The same as before.
12 c.) Less than before.*
 3. Are you (the wife) concerned about the sexual relationship?
3 a.) Greatly concerned.
4 b.) Slightly concerned.
5 c.) Unconcerned.

Figure VIII

2. Please check the statements which best describe you and your husband's sexual relations now as compared with those before his stroke.

1. Is the relationship satisfactory to each of you?

_____ a.) More satisfactory than before.

_____ b.) The same as before.

4 c.) Less satisfactory than before.

2. Is the frequency of your sexual relations:

1 a.) More than before.

_____ b.) The same as before.

3 c.) Less than before.

3. Are you (the wife) concerned about the sexual relationship?

4 a.) Greatly concerned.*

_____ b.) Slightly concerned.

_____ c.) Unconcerned.

Figure IX

2. Please check the statements which best describe you and your husband's sexual relations now as compared with those before his stroke.

1. Is the relationship satisfactory to each of you?

_____ a.) More satisfactory than before.

_____ b.) The same as before.

4 c.) Less satisfactory than before.

2. Is the frequency of your sexual relations:

_____ a.) More than before.

_____ b.) The same as before.

4 c.) Less than before.

3. Are you (the wife) concerned about the sexual relationship?

_____ a.) Greatly concerned.

4 b.) Slightly concerned.*

_____ c.) Unconcerned.

Figure X

2. Please check the statements which best describe you and your husband's sexual relations now as compared with those before his stroke.

1. Is the relationship satisfactory to each of you?

 a.) More satisfactory than before.

 3 b.) The same as before.

 5 c.) Less satisfactory than before.

2. Is the frequency of your sexual relations:

 1 a.) More than before.

 2 b.) The same as before.

 5 c.) Less than before.

3. Are you (the wife) concerned about the sexual relationship?

 a.) Greatly concerned.

 b.) Slightly concerned.

 8 c.) Unconcerned.*

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