

SERVIÇO DE MEDICINA SEXUAL



SETOR DE REPRODUÇÃO HUMANA, DEPARTAMENTO DE GINECOLOGIA E OBSTETRICIA, FACULDADE DE MEDICINA DE RIBEIRÃO PRETO - USP

# World Meeting on Sexual Medicine

## Infertility and sexuality: Effect on the couple

Lúcia Alves S Lara

Gynecologist and Sexologist

Sexual Medicine Service, Department of Gynecology and  
Obstetrics, Faculty of Medicine, São Paulo University

11/10/2014

# Infertility

- Infertility is defined as the inability to conceive after 12 months of regular unprotected sexual intercourse
- The prevalence rates of such condition vary from 7-17% worldwide
- Infertility is a social, psychological, economic, and medical problem affecting couples all over the world

# Infertility is distressing for couples...

- **And** this condition may be a severely distressing experience for many couples (Galhardo et al. 2011).
- And may affect sexuality that is a fundamental part of the individual's life.
- The couple is particularly sensitive to the crisis that infertility may cause



→ They often report quality-of-life impairments, especially in terms of sexuality, self-esteem and partnership quality (Wischmann T, et al., 2014)

# In fact...

- Sexual problems are common among infertile couples: erectile dysfunction, hypoactive sexual desire, decreased sexual activity (Huyghe E et al., 2013)
- There are indications of a loss of spontaneous sexuality during the experience of infertility (Wischmann T, et al., 2014)
- Depression is one of the main psychological disorders associated with infertility; a factor that may be detrimental for infertile individuals (Drosdzol and Skrzypulec 2009b)
- QoL seems to be similarly affected in both infertile men and women (Chachamovich J et al., 2009)

❖ Women may be affected in their sexual function due to the diagnosis of infertility and/or after unsucceeded treatment

## Also...

- Infertile women have higher risk of depression and anxiety related to (Al-Homaidan HT, 2011)
  - The diagnosis of infertility (Nelson, et al. 2008)
  - The duration and cause of infertility (Ramazanzadeh F et al., 2004)
  - Their partner's infertility (Ogawa M et al., 2011)
  - Pressure from family for the couple to have a child (Al-Homaidan HT, 2011).
  - Lower self-esteem (Wischmann T, et al., 2014)

Depression and anxiety symptoms  
vs.  
female sexual function?

- It has been widely demonstrated that depressive symptoms are associated with impairments of sexual function and satisfaction (Baldwin DS 2001; Pakpour, et al. 2012)
- Depressive women show inhibited sexual arousal, inhibited orgasm and less sexual pleasure during intercourse (Frohlich P & Meston C, 2002)

## Does infertility impact negatively on male sexuality?

### ➤ Infertile men:

- ✓ Show a reduction in sexual desire and satisfaction (Ramezanzadeh et al., 2006)
- ✓ Have lower overall life satisfaction, heightened distress and higher treatment-related stress (Connolly et al., 1992; Beutel et al., 1999)
- ✓ Have higher rates of erectile dysfunction and premature ejaculation, and less intercourse satisfaction (Monga, et al., 2004; Gao J et al., 2013)
- ✓ Higher prevalence of anxiety and depression when compared to fertile men (Gao J et al., 2013)

## Infertile men...

- ✓ Premature ejaculation and erectile dysfunction are associated with anxiety and depression: two conditions that act together to impair sexual function

(Gao J et al., 2013)

❖ A cross-sectional analysis of 357 men in infertile couples

→ Male partners in couples who perceive isolated male factor infertility have a lower sexual and personal quality of life (Smith JF et al., 2009)

## Coitus frequency among infertile men...

- ❖ A cross-sectional study with 1,298 infertile men at the average age of 35, showed that:
  - Two years after being diagnosed with infertility, the average monthly coital frequency was seven (IQR 5-10; range 0-40)
  - 24% of couples were having intercourse less or as much as 4 times a month.

- **And** the factors that affected coital frequency were: age and erectile dysfunction



- Men with better erectile function had 1.12 times higher odds of having more frequent coitus

# To evaluate the sexual function of men and women in infertile couples

- **We** conducted a literature review searching for articles published between 2000 and 2010 which assessed the sexual function of couples during **infertility treatment**.
- The studies selected were those that evaluated sexual function through validated questionnaires
- Of the 134 articles identified, only 14 articles met our inclusion criteria; 7 studies evaluated males' sexuality and 7 evaluated females' sexuality.

# Among men

- Four studies identified infertility as a major risk factor for erectile dysfunction, with rates ranging from 2 to 30%.
- One study found that sexual desire is reduced in about 52 % of infertile men
- One study did not find changes in sexual response
- Two studies found that sexual and marital satisfaction were reduced after the diagnosis of infertility and assisted reproductive treatment

# Among women

- Five studies found that the risks of sexual dysfunction were higher after the diagnosis of infertility
- Two studies reported high rates of arousal dysfunction and anorgasmia.
- One study showed a frequency of 83% of anorgasmia, 80% of hypoactive sexual desire, 67% of dyspareunia, and 6.7% of vaginismus
- Two studies reported no changes in sexual function
- One found that only 6.3% of infertile women reported a worsening of their sex lives

# Summary

- ED is the most frequent sexual complaint among infertile men which was associated to both depressive symptoms and infertility
- The main complaint of infertile women was usually related to the marital relationship

➤ It is possible that sexual dysfunction of one partner may act as a factor of impairment of sexual function in the infertile couple

➤ However, this is a controversial theme

➤ **Comparison between 30 recently diagnosed infertile couples with 30 infertile couples undergoing Intrauterine Insemination and 52 fertile couples.**

- Men of all the three groups scored higher in sexual satisfaction, sexual desire and orgasm than their female partners
- Men in the first group had lower scores on all the subscales when compared with treated group and controls
- Women belonging to first and second groups showed an impairment of sexual arousal, satisfaction, lubrication and orgasm when compared to fertile controls.

- Comparison between infertile couples and couples seeking elective sterilization showed that:
  - 83% of infertile couples reported feeling social pressures to conceive.
  - No statistically significant impact on sexual functioning in women was observed
  - While men, in the infertile couples, had lower erectile function and lower intercourse satisfaction scores.

## ➤ In contrast...

- Studies published from 1990 to 2011 showed that:
  - Male factor infertility did not have a negative marital impact.
  - Infertile male expressed higher marital satisfaction than their female partners.
  - On the other hand, infertile females had significantly less stable marital relationship compared to fertile females, which was associated with their treatment experience.

- Nevertheless, there are contradictory results concerning the satisfaction with the relationship and the closeness between the two partners
  - Some studies have shown that infertility is linked to the highest relationship instability and the lowest sexual satisfaction
  - Other studies implied that infertile couples did not differ from fertile couples in marital relationship
  - On the other hand, some studies have shown that the marital relationship seems to get stronger and more supportive

(Coëffin-Driol & Giami A, 2004)

- ❖ It is worth it to highlight that some conditions that are prevalent among infertile couples may impact marital relationship and their sexual relationship
- ❖ The couples express a loss of spontaneity in sex that can be related to the strategies they set up to maximize their chances of pregnancy and to medical care (Reder F et al, 2009)

# For example

- The prevalence of psychosexual problems is high among infertile couples, mainly in couples who did not have success with the treatment (Perlis N et al., 2013, Nene UA et al., 2005; Boxer A.D., 1996)
- Depression is high prevalent among infertile couples, mainly in those couples with long duration of infertility (Ashkani H et al., 2006)
- Self-esteem is lower in the couples with longer infertility duration (keramat A et al., 2014).

# Case-control study

➤ In comparison with fertile couples, infertile couples showed

→ Lower self-esteem and lower marital satisfaction



Such conditions may provoke relationship instability



Low sexual satisfaction

In contrast, some studies have shown that infertility may even strengthen the couple's relationship.

# Cross-sectional study

- Interview with 40 infertile couples indicated that:

Sexual activity decreased as the number of childless years increased.



However, the marital relationship got stronger and more supportive.

- ➡ The fact that they share experiences of stress during infertility treatment, may improve the marital relationship, which may increase dyadic cohesion
- ➡ Men and women in couples who perceive equal levels of social infertility stress, report high levels of marital adjustment
- ➡ When women feel a similar need for parenthood as their male partner, they report significantly high levels of marital satisfaction

(Peterson BD et al., 2003)

## Also...

- ➡ Several unsuccessful treatment attempts are associated with good dyadic cohesion.
- ➡ Treatment may **even** improve sexual parameters for both women and men, thus increasing significantly the marital relationship.

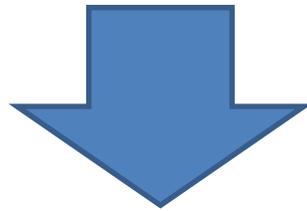
❖ **A recent cross-sectional study conducted with 385 infertile couples**

➤ Those with higher educational level, higher monthly income, living in urban areas, shorter duration of marriage, less time of infertility, and male gender were associated with better QoL status

and

➤ They were more satisfied with their sexual life

- But, it is important to highlight the heterogeneity of the studies from different countries ...



- What implies that, the consequence of infertility on sexuality among couples differ in different cultures

# Cultural consequence of infertility among couples

- **The psycho-social consequences suffered by infertile couples are severe mainly in poor countries.**
- A determinant for the types of psycho-social consequences of infertility is whether the infertility is caused by a female or male factor



- Female infertility is linked to domestic violence, union dissolution and sexual dysfunction among infertile couples

## In Northern Ghana...

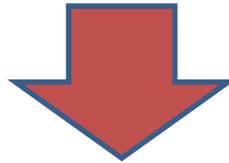
- Couples without children are denied membership in the ancestral world, thereby losing the opportunity to live again.
- Infertile couples are socially stigmatized and excluded from leadership roles in their communities.
- The social consequences of infertility are severe, particularly for women
- Both males and females are engaged in sex with multiple partners to prove their fertility



→ Infertility among Ghanaians has important consequences for social interactions, marital stability and mental health.

## ❖ **Among Polish couples:**

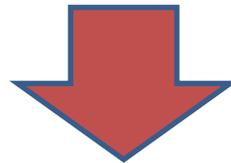
- The highest relationship instability and the lowest sexual satisfaction in both, female and male partners



- Are associated with the diagnosis of male factor and infertility duration

❖ Among Polish couples:

- And age, annual income, duration of infertility, and history of unsuccessful IVF treatment



- Had a negative correlation with psychological health status and marital quality.

# Conclusion

- ✚ There are conflicting data on the sexual function of infertile couples
- ✚ The impact of infertility on couples sexuality vary according to different cultures
- ✚ Sexual dysfunction among infertile individuals, could be a consequence of the diagnosis, investigation and treatment of infertility.
- ✚ There are evidences that anxiety and depression are associated with the diagnosis and treatment of infertility among couples

- ✦ Infertility has a negative impact on women's self-esteem.
- ✦ Infertile women have higher risk of depression and anxiety related to the diagnosis of infertility, the duration of infertility, their partner's infertility
- ✦ Men may show HSD, decreased sexual activity, premature ejaculation and ED after being diagnosed as the responsible for the infertility
- ✦ Primary infertile couples should be assessed in their sexual function before the process of assisted reproduction

- ✚ During the treatment for infertility it is important for physicians to systematically open discussion on sexual issues
- ✚ In some cases it is necessary to help patients rebuild their sexuality as a source of pleasure to the end of the period of assisted reproduction
- ✚ More studies need to be carried out on the sexual function previous to the diagnosis of infertility among couples

- ✚ The studies on the infertile couples' sexuality are mostly descriptive and presents infertility as a deleterious experience for both women and men
- ✚ **Divergent** samples and assessment instruments, together with gender differences regarding how they face infertility, mean that, so far, there are no valid findings about sexual disorders among infertile couples.
- ✚ Future research should find an appropriate way of addressing these methodological shortcomings.

- ✦ Finally, there is a need for high-quality, prospective studies using consistent methodology to accurately evaluate the impact of infertility on sexuality of infertile couples



Thank you!!!