
The problems of 'normal' sex

Whatever the sexual revolution was or is, it has carried in tow a host of problems and "deviancies" judged worthy of treatment by a burgeoning number of sex therapy specialists. Masters and Johnson and others have repeatedly described such problems in couples seeking treatment and prescribed various techniques to help make sex lives more "normal."

One research problem, however, is that few studies have been done to determine the constituents of sexual normality. In an effort to pursue the question of "what is normal?" researchers at the University of Pittsburgh's Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic surveyed 100 couples "who believed their marriages were working well." The couples, married from less than one to more than 20 years, were asked to report on what sexual problems, if any, were occurring in the marriage.

The incidence of reported problems, particularly among women, was "strikingly high" among this sample of "white, Christian and well educated" couples, Ellen Frank, Carol Anderson and Debra Rubenstein report in the July 20 *NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE*. Although more than 80 percent of the couples said that their overall marital and sexual relations were happy and satisfying, 40 percent of the men reported problems with erection or ejaculation and 63 percent of the women reported corresponding problems in achieving arousal or orgasm. In addition, half the men and three-quarters of the women said they experienced other consistent "difficulties," including an inability to relax, disinterest, too little foreplay and tenderness and "partner chooses

inconvenient time."

The majority of couples surveyed said they had intercourse one to three times a week but only one percent reported daily intercourse (and two percent "never"). Couples who had sex least frequently tended to have more sex-related problems. Aside from difficulty with erection in males, no dysfunction appeared to be related to age.

The higher-than-expected occurrence of self-reported problems is particularly significant because the surveyed couples represent, if anything, a more satisfied group than most Americans, the researchers say. "This more satisfied population would be expected to report a lower frequency of sexual problems than would be predicted in the general population," they suggest.

The data also cast doubt on several previous studies that point to better sexual functioning among higher classes. The Pittsburgh group says their results correspond to similar rates of sex problems found with black, lower class women.

The results also reveal that the husband frequently underestimates the wife's problems and are "consistent with the typical American pattern...in which as long as the wife neither complains nor refuses to have intercourse, the husband assumes that all is well," say the investigators. Despite the problems, the couples "still feel very positive about their sexual relations and their marriages," they report. However, it appears that when problems do occur, those of the wife were "least well tolerated" and produced a "ripple effect on all sexual relations" involving the couple. □

sium or a trace element, because of the presence of a toxic agent of some sort in the preparation, or because of some totally unexpected cause."

The tragedy, he continues, is "that the liquid protein materials were never tested in appropriate laboratory animals to determine their safety for prolonged use for weight reduction. Moreover, there is a serious dearth of detailed clinical studies on the metabolic effect of the liquid protein diet." The unnecessary deaths, he concludes, "are a somber reminder of... the consequences that can occur when therapy outstrips its research base."

The liquid protein diet, in fact, appears to be potentially fatal even when young, healthy persons take it under a physician's supervision. All four patients described in the report by Singh and co-workers were young and healthy, except for their obesity. All received some form of medical supervision during the five or six months they took the diet. And all received emergency medical treatment for their heart arrhythmias, yet only one survived.

Although the Food and Drug Administration has not yet banned the diet, it is investigating the deaths associated with it. The FDA has also issued warnings about the safety of the diet, and there are indications that dieters are heeding these warnings. For instance, the U.S. Public Health Service recently reported that about twice as many dieters are using fasting as a total means of losing weight during 1978 as during 1977, suggesting that far fewer are relying on liquid protein diets this year than last to help them lose weight. □

Viking: A death and an anniversary

The Viking mission to Mars has accumulated an impressive list of accomplishments, beginning with the arrival of Viking 1 at its circum-Martian orbit on June 19, 1976, and the successful touchdown on the surface by its landing craft about a month later on July 20. Viking 2 arrived on August 7 of the same year, sending its own lander down on September 3. Two recent events have now been added to the Viking diary—one an occasion for happiness, the other for sorrow.

Last Thursday, a group of Viking participants and National Aeronautics and Space Administration officials met at the NASA Langley Research Center in Hampton, Va., to celebrate the second anniversary of the Viking 1 landing. The lander itself is still at work, having passed its originally planned operating lifetime, and the birthday of the billion-dollar mission's major event was marked by the issuance at Langley of a 15-cent commemorative stamp.

Only four days later, however, a less cheery event took place on Mars. The Viking 2 orbiter succumbed at last to a series

Liquid protein: A deadly diet

It sounded logical in 1967 when several French physicians advocated using liquid protein as a dietary supplement for obese patients trying to lose weight by fasting. It no longer sounds very logical—or safe.

Liquid protein consists, essentially, of protein processed from the gelatin in cowhide or from some other source of connective tissue. It supposedly provides patients with just enough low-calorie nutrition to help them survive the rigors of near-starvation diets and has been reported to bring about remarkable weight losses with relatively minor side effects. In 1976 the liquid protein diet was popularized in a book called *The Last Chance Diet*. During 1977 at least 100,000 Americans used liquid protein.

Toward the latter part of 1977, however, the diet was linked with a number of deaths. And the indictment has continued to grow. At last count, the diet has been associated with 58 deaths, according to the July 7 *MORBIDITY AND MORTALITY*

WEEKLY REPORTS, published by the U.S. Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. All of the deaths occurred during the latter half of 1977 and the early part of this year.

How might the diet have caused all these deaths? Apparently by triggering heart arrhythmias—excessively rapid beating of the ventricles of the heart accompanied by twitching (fibrillation) of fibers in the ventricles—resulting in heart failure, according to Bramah N. Singh and his colleagues at the University of California at Los Angeles School of Medicine. Their report is in the July 14 *JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION*. The precise means by which the diet creates these heart aberrations is not known, however. As Theodore B. Van Itallie, a physician at St. Luke's Hospital Center in New York City, points out in an accompanying editorial, "It is not clear whether the deleterious effects of liquid protein diets occur because of some insidious dietary deficiency, e.g., of protein, potas-