



Men tight-lipped over loss of libido

Despite an increasing awareness of health and wellbeing among men, sexual dysfunction remains a taboo subject, writes **BRIAN O'CONNELL**

FOR SEVERAL months I have been documenting various aspects of men's health for this supplement. In that time I've touched on a broad range of topics from gay parenting to prostate cancer, doctor visits to middle aged fitness. Generally, men have been willing to speak about issues affecting them personally, some of them in a very heartfelt and upfront way.

As a society, we've come to believe that Irish men are currently far more upfront than any previous generation about issues associated with their

health and wellbeing. The rise of the metrosexual male and increased feminisation of masculinity have facilitated this renewed openness.

This week, in researching an article on male sexual dysfunction, I was not able to find one Irish man willing to speak openly about issues related to their sex life. Not one. I spoke to advocacy groups and public relations companies who have promoted nationwide campaigns, and none was able to get an Irish man to speak on the record. So, why is it that Irish men appear so unwilling to speak about an issue that affects as many as 50 per cent of men over the age of 40?

Part of the problem perhaps is that there remains a general reticence among Irish men to speak about general issues associated with their health. In last week's supplement, Peadar McNamara, a prostate cancer survivor, spoke about a reluctance among men of his age to present for prostate examinations, because of their invasive nature.

GPs too have spoken about having to almost decode male patients when they arrive into their surgeries. Often they will only get to the actual problem by speaking in a roundabout manner. It is this priggishness towards their bodies that is leading many Irish men to suffer sexual dysfunction in silence, despite advances both in treatment and diagnosis.

The most common health problems in this field for men is erectile dysfunction (ED) – an issue that has yet to feature naturally in locker room or bar stool chat. Research from the Journal of Sexual Medicine points to the fact that men concerned about ED can take up to a year before seeking treatment or speaking to a doctor about their concerns.

Several online campaigns, including manmatters.ie, have attempted recently to raise the issue in a sensitive and informative way. One of the few public personalities to speak about the issue has been former Irish rugby hooker Shane Byrne.

“Now it's time the men of Ireland made the same commitment to defending their health as they do to their team,” he said during a recent campaign. “Many Irish men who experience erectile difficulties or ED do not realise how common it is and are too embarrassed to do anything about it. The good news is, there is help out there and that's why I'm urging men to tackle the problem. Take action, talk to your GP – and get any problems sorted.”

Byrne has spoken in general terms about the condition, yet so far no high profile Irish male has been public in relaying his own personal experience. This is in contrast to the likes of comedian Des Bishop and broadcaster Michael Murphy who have spoken about testicular and prostate cancers respectively.

One Irish doctor is now attempting to assist Irish men who are too embarrassed to seek face-to-face consultations about matters to do with their sexual dysfunction. Dr Andrew Rynne, a Kildare-based GP, has set up a facility on his website, andrewrynn.com, whereby men can sign up for an online sexual health consultation and receive advice and treatment without ever having to meet the doctor in person.

“It occurred to me that the internet cannot do everything in medical terms. You still need to examine patients, or take X-rays and blood tests for many illnesses,” says Rynne. “With sexual dysfunction issues there is nothing to examine usually. It usually involves a series of questions and then working out what the problem is. The internet can lend itself very well to this consultation.

“How it works is that a patient logs onto my internet site and commits to a consultation process. It costs them in the region of €50 to commit. For that they get a publication on their particular dysfunction and they are asked to fill out a medical questionnaire, which I look at and then advise.”

Rynne started the service about a year ago, and so far the uptake has been high. He says the two most common complaints from men are erectile dysfunction and premature ejaculation. He also believes Irish men are not in any way unique. His website is accessed by men from Europe and Asia, all of whom prefer the less personal access to treatment an online consultation provides.

“I think it is a universal pattern that men and women find it very hard to speak about sexual dysfunction. It is a very private and personal area and people don’t like to talk face to face about it,” he says. “Often they tend to go to the internet where they can get a lot of shoddy information, which usually results in some company or other trying to sell them Viagra. That medicine doesn’t always work.”

Men should, he believes, take reassurance from the huge advances in treatment of sexual dysfunctions from the 1970s onwards. Rynne adds that while modern medicine may alleviate certain symptoms, unless the underlying issues are addressed, then the treatment may not be comprehensive.

“In my experience, the commonest cause of erectile dysfunction is when performance anxiety arises. You can have one failure and then men start to look at themselves and be very self-conscious. I always say that you cannot be in the audience and looking at your self trying to perform at the same time.”

<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/health/2010/0615/1224272506949.html>