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Wright, H & Forshaw, M

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“No Particular Place to Go”: Gender, Sexuality and Sexual Health Help-Seeking in UK Older Adults



Hayley Wright¹ & Mark J. Forshaw²

¹ Coventry University, UK; ² Liverpool John Moores University, UK



INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, research is showing that there are many positive mental and physical health benefits to remaining sexually active and maintaining intimate relationships in later life (Lee et al. 2016; Wright & Jenks, 2016). It is important that issues surrounding older adult sexual health are supported by healthcare professionals and policy makers.

However, research shows a reluctance within the healthcare professions to enquire about the sexual health of older-aged patients (Taylor & Gosney, 2011). Therefore, there may be a gap in sexual healthcare provision for these individuals. Furthermore, Lee et al. (2015) indicate a potential gender difference in older adult who access sexual health services. With potential imbalance in both provision and access of sexual health services, the issue requires further exploration to understand the magnitude in terms of population statistics.

The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA; Wave 6) has been invaluable in revealing the sexual attitudes, activities and relationships of adults over the age of 50 years in the UK (Lee et al. 2015; 2016). However, we know relatively little about sexual health help-seeking behaviours in those who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) in this cohort.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2014) report that around 1.9% of UK adults over the age of 50 years identify as LGB. Since LGB adults are more likely to suffer from physical and mental ill-health than their heterosexual counterparts (Semlyen et al. 2016), it is necessary to explore the scale of sexual health concerns and help-seeking behaviours in this group.

The current study explores gender differences in the proportions of straight and LGB older adults over the age of 50 years in the UK:

- who had concerns about their sex life over the past 3 months
- who sought help / advice for those concerns

We extrapolate these proportions to UK population figures, in order to estimate the scale of the problem of sexual health help-seeking at a national level.

METHODS

Participants

The **English Longitudinal Study of Ageing** (ELSA) is a nationally representative survey of UK men and women over the age of 50 years. Data were drawn from ELSA Wave 6 (N=10,601), which was the first to include data on sexual attitudes, sexual activity and relationships.

Respondents who did not answer the key question pertaining to lifetime sexual experiences (n=3,762) and those under the age of 50 years (n=203) were excluded. The remaining sample was comprised of 3013 men and 3659 women, between the ages of 50 and 89 years (n= 6,672).

Design

Respondents were not explicitly asked to report their **sexuality** in ELSA, and so we devised a proxy indicator based on lifetime sexual experiences. Respondents who stated that their sexual experiences had never been with the same sex were coded as ‘**straight**’, and those who had at least some sexual experiences with the same sex were coded as ‘**LGB**’.

Respondents were asked **how worried they had been about their overall sex life** over the past 3 months. Those who responded with either ‘a little bit / moderately / very / extremely worried or concerned’ were coded as having concerns.

Respondents were asked if they had **sought help or advice about their sex life** from any of the following sources: family / friend; self-help book / information leaflet / internet; self-help groups / helpline; GP / family doctor; sexual health clinic; psychiatrist / psychologist; relationship counsellor; other type of clinic or healthcare professional. If they answered ‘yes’ to at least one of these they were coded as having sought help or advice.

RESULTS

Owing to the lower number of LGB individuals in the sample, we show the proportions (%) of LGB and straight men and women who reported having concerns about their sex life over the past 12 months, and those who accessed help/support for those concerns.

Table 1

Demographics, sexual concerns and help-seeking of LGB and straight men and women in ELSA Wave 6 (n = 6,672).

Variables	LGB		Straight	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
% (n)	50.5% (139)	49.5% (136)	44.9% (2874)	55.1% (3523)
Age range in years	51 - 85	50 - 86	50 - 89	50 - 89
Mean age in years (SD)	63.9 (7.9)	62.3 (7.9)	66.4 (8.7)	65.5 (8.9)
% with sexual concerns (n)	49.6% (69)	36.0% (49)	39.5% (1136)	23.9% (842)
% who sought help (n)	17.4% (12)	14.3% (7)	13.7% (156)	8.6% (72)

Table 1 shows that LGB men had the highest proportion of concerns about their sex life, whereas straight women were least likely to have any concerns. Similarly, in terms of help-seeking behaviours, LGB men were most likely and straight women were least likely to seek help or advice. Across the sexuality groups, men were more likely than women to have sexual concerns, and to seek help or advice for those concerns.

- Age UK (2016) report that there are approximately **23.6 million** people over the age of 50 years living in the UK.
- The Integrated Household Survey (ONS, 2014) shows that **1.9%** of UK adults over the age of 50 years identify as LGB.
- Therefore, there are around **448,400** people over the age of 50 years in the UK who identify as LGB.

We used these figures to extrapolate those shown in Table 1 above (averaging across gender), to estimate the UK population figures of older people with sexual concerns, those who seek help, and those who do not.

Table 2

Extrapolated figures from ELSA data to estimate UK population statistics for sexual concerns and help-seeking behaviour

UK population estimates	LGB	Straight
% (n)	1.9% (448,400)	98.1% (23,151,600)
% with sexual concerns (n)	42.9% (192,363)	30.9% (7,153,844)
% seeking help (n)	16.1% (30,970)	11.5% (822,692)
% who do not seek help (n)	83.9% (161,393)	88.5% (6,331,152)

ELSA is a nationally representative cohort study of men and women over the age of 50 years in the UK. Therefore, we can assume that the data we extracted from ELSA Wave 6 (Table 1) can provide a good estimate of UK population figures. Table 2 shows a staggering number of older adults in the UK who do not seek help for sexual concerns.

There are approximately 161,393 LGB and 6,331,152 straight adults over the age of 50 years in the UK who have concerns about their sex life but do not seek help or advice for those concerns.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the current study was to explore the proportion of UK men and women over the age of 50 years who have concerns about their sexual health, and whether they seek help or advice for those concerns. We used data available in ELSA to investigate whether these proportions differ for LBG and straight individuals.

Our results showed that, overall, a higher proportion of men had concerns about their sex life and sought help or advice for those concerns than women. In terms of sexuality, LGB individuals were more likely to have concerns and seek help for those concerns than straight individuals, regardless of gender. In all cases, less than 20% of older adults who had concerns about their sex life actually sought help or advice.

When we extrapolate these proportions to recent UK population statistics, there are an estimated 161,393 LGB and 6,331,152 straight adults over the age of 50 years who have concerns about their sex life but do not seek help or advice for those concerns.

Implications

Our study suggests that there is a notable number of UK men and women over the age of 50 years who are not accessing the sexual health advice and support that they may need. This could be due to a two-way generation gap, where older people do not feel comfortable talking about sex, and healthcare professionals avoid discussing this with older patients (Taylor & Gosney, 2011). There is no dedicated pathway for sexual health services for older adults in the UK, which may also add to the reluctance to seek help. However, sexual health services are open to all regardless of age, gender or sexuality, and so there is scope for developing a more positive and sensitive approach within sexual healthcare services for older people.

It is important to tackle the attitudes and practices of healthcare professionals, and to ensure that sexual health services and advice are available when needed. Healthcare professionals and public health experts must work together to encourage older adults to talk about, and seek help for, sexual concerns.

Strengths and limitations

We have used a large, nationally representative dataset (ELSA) of UK men and women over the age of 50 years to estimate the scale of the problem of individuals who do not seek help for sexual concerns. This may help us to understand the rate of undiagnosed sexual health problems in older adults. ELSA does not collect routine data on sexuality, and so we have relied on proxy measures to categorise LGB and straight individuals. Similarly, the question of concerns about ‘sex life’ may not necessarily imply a sexual health issue, and could relate to emotional, psychological or physical problems. Future Waves of ELSA should consider these limitations.

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CONTACT

Dr Hayley Wright

Centre for Research in Psychology, Behaviour and Achievement

Coventry University, CV1 5FB, United Kingdom

Email: hayley.wright@coventry.ac.uk

Phone: +44 (0) 2477 659369

Twitter: @hayleymwright

