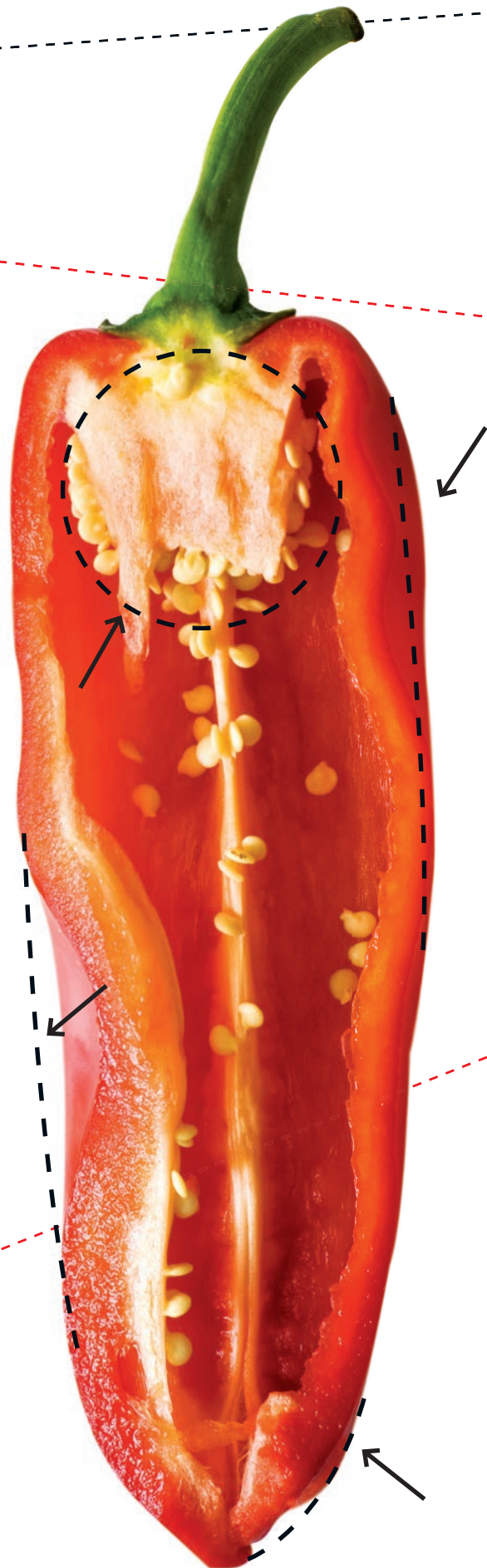


DESIGNER VAGINAS

Forget Botox
and boob jobs.
Women are putting
their lady parts under the
surgeon's knife in the name
of heightened pleasure and
prettier vulvas. Question
is, do your lady bits
really need a reno?

Words: Cassy Small



More than 50 per cent of the population has one, yet there is no body part more mysterious, confusing and confronting than the female genitals. And as if it wasn't enough to worry about dimply thighs, a wobbly tummy or crow's feet, now what lies beneath our bloomers is up for public comparison, self-consciousness and – cosmetic surgery. In fact, genital image is the new body image.

More than ever, women are exposed to images of female genitalia. But instead of being presented with a realistic depiction, what we see is a 'neat' and hairless vision – one that's even further constricted by Australian censorship laws, which prevent a protruding labia minora being shown in titles like *People* or *Picture* magazine. "Unfortunately, the mainstream media always present a very narrow idea of 'normal' whereas normal is actually very broad. This has led to many women believing that they themselves are not normal when, in fact, they are," says Philip Werner, author and photographer of the book *101 Vagina*.

And frighteningly – in the context of skyrocketing bookings for labiaplasties and the like (more on that soon) – many of us have no idea what our before shot looks like.

The International Vagina Dialogue Survey, by birth control manufacturer NuvaRing, found that only 27 per cent of female respondents stated they knew exactly what their vaginal appearance was, 48 per cent had a reasonable idea and 24 per cent had a partial idea or no idea at all. So in effect any genital shame is based on comparing an imagined actuality to an

imagined ideal. Hmph.

The apparent epidemic of obsession with perfect private parts goes deeper, according to body image and wellbeing consultant Nadine Cameron, of Body Map (bodymap.com.au).

On the surface it's easy to blame the chasm between what we believe we should look like, and reality. "The vaginas most frequently seen by the masses have distorted our view of what is average or 'normal'. So, often,

“ Sorting through these taboos is actually vitally important to our society's wellbeing. ”

women are choosing to have surgery on the basis of a false understanding of how they compare to the norm," says Cameron. Like any other part of our body, genitals come in many shapes, sizes and colours. We don't look like Barbie dolls down there.

But according to many experts, the dissatisfaction (or at least instability) is rooted in a distorted view of female sexuality, of which the International Vagina Dialogue Survey findings are symptomatic.

Werner compiled the controversial book with the aim to break down the taboo around the female genitals and body image shame in general. "I wanted to offer the opportunity to allow people to celebrate their bodies rather than feeling ashamed or guilty. I believe that the sexual repression has much deeper repercussions in our society than we are generally aware. Sorting through these taboos is actually vitally important to our society's wellbeing," he says.

You may remember the fracas over the first Australian television commercial to use the word 'vagina'. Way back in... post-internet porn 2012. Sanitary brand Carefree's TVC was the year's most complained about ad, because it didn't bestow a pseudonym like hoo-hoo!

So Werner's book, which includes photographs of 101 vaginas along with a message from each woman, is (by cultural construct anyway) a big deal. It

also attests to the ramifications of demonising what's been pretty handy for procreation – survival of the species and all – and pleasure. Werner's candid collection spans the emotional spectrum – some are deep and extremely personal, others are humorous and a little cheeky, but all are telling.

"Moving from shame to acceptance, the celebration of the divine feminine and the changing relationship that women have over the years were some of the main themes."

Va-jay-jay 101


Okay, so say we really are as anatomically naive as the survey suggests. How can we possibly accept what we don't have the foggiest about?

Many body image experts believe such stark subject-object relationships with our own body parts contribute to genital image problems. Here's a crash course: what you can see from the outside is called the vulva and the vagina is actually the internal passage. The vulva comprises four lips,

or labia – the outer two are the labia majora and the smaller inner two, labia minora.

So far, so neutral. But as the Carefree outcry shows, it's not.

We, as a society and as individuals, harbour deep-



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seated ideas of what is 'normal' or 'beautiful'. And it's just as fluid, depending on your personal experience and cultural context. In the Western *One Night In Paris* era it's all about invisible labia and pre-pubescent follicles. Whereas in sub-Saharan Africa women strive for a significantly lengthened inner labia.

"We have a nation full of women who crave being thin when only a few decades ago quite a different look was coveted," says Cameron. Our genitals are placed under the same scrutiny as our weight. (Sure you look chubby next to Cara Delevingne. So does an Australia's Next Top Model.)

According to the revised statute of genital aesthetics (don't ask your lawyer friend about it), a protruding labia, and God forbid a pubic wisp, is considered 'ugly' and less sexually pleasing for a partner. Recent British

doco The Sex Education Show, in which journalist Anna Richardson confronted high school students with pictures of real women's genitals, revealed a shocking bias, with one group of senior boys admitting they'd send a prospective sexual partner to remove her pubes before sleeping with her. Girls were similarly taken aback by colour inconsistencies and asymmetrical shapes.

Extreme measures

Little wonder many women are unable to embrace their intimate body parts with the same fervour as participants in *101 Vagina*. Image dissatisfaction is one reason a record number of women are electing to undergo genital cosmetic surgery. According to a 2013 report from Women's Health Victoria, between 2000 and 2011, the number of Australian women accessing Medicare benefits for genital cosmetic surgery grew from 640 per annum to 1,565 per annum.

The most common?

Labiaplasty – The inner lips of the vulva, the labia minora, are trimmed. This is also the most popular procedure. Tightening and reduction of the labia majora can also be surgically performed.

Hood reduction – The hood of the clitoris is tightened, not removed.

Hymen repair – A surgical reconstruction of the hymen.

Vaginoplasty – Reconstruction and tightening of the vaginal

canal, most commonly after childbirth. The highest concentration of women having this procedure are in the 35 to 44 age group.

Classified as non-major procedures, all can be done under local anaesthetic or general anaesthetic. If you're crossing your legs, it's with good reason. Cosmetic surgeon and labiaplasty specialist Dr Ashley Granot, from Melbourne's Me Clinic, says that, like almost any procedure, some discomfort can be expected. Post-op complications are uncommon, but can include infection or bleeding.

But to be fair, the boom in nether nip and tucks isn't entirely a product of external pressure or personal angst. A 2009 study published in the *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* cited pain and discomfort as being the top reasons women had genital cosmetic surgery. These results resonate with Dr Granot, who says 70 to 80 per cent of the women he sees have a medical reason for seeking surgery. "They all have a cosmetic element, but as well as not liking the look, there can be some serious medical symptomatology." He lists pain and chafing of the labia minora, pinching of the labia minora that can stick out of underwear or bathers, pain when doing things like riding a bicycle and pain during intercourse.

It was discomfort during sex and when wearing tight pants



that first prompted Tamara* to have labiaplasty at the age of 30. "I always felt slightly larger than normal and it was something I had always been self-conscious of. It made me feel ugly and unsexy, and I didn't like my partner seeing me in full view," she recalls.

Surgical stigma

The flipside for women considering surgery is the stigma associated with surgery itself. It wasn't lost on Tamara, who did her research online and sought reassurance from her cosmetic surgeon before deciding. "She made me feel at ease about it straight away and reassured me that I was completely normal for feeling the way I did. She showed me some before and after photos and discussed the process," she says.

Three years later, Tamara says she feels proud and empowered about what she has done. "This was something I did for me and only me. As well as feeling great about the way I look, my overall self-confidence has been boosted," she says.

But the emotional ramifications of surgery can be huge. Dr Granot says the women he sees are already emotionally sensitive, and he's disturbed by stories of women flippantly entering into these procedures. That's what separates an empowering procedure from a disempowering, exploitative one. "In my experience it's a small percentage of women who are only interested in this for cosmetic reasons. I tend to have



PHOTOGRAPHY: THINKSTOCK

“The number of **AUSTRALIAN WOMEN** accessing Medicare benefits for genital cosmetic surgery grew from 640 per annum to **1565 PER ANNUM.**”

a gut feeling about if someone is seeing me for the wrong reasons. Generally these women are very self-conscious and deserve to be treated privately and with the utmost respect." Tamara admits to residual embarrassment about the procedure. "It's certainly not an easy thing to share with others. There aren't many people I've told and when I had my surgery, only my sister knew I was getting it done," she says.

Down there dysmorphia

While most surgery candidates have sound medical reasons, according to Dr Granot, he does admit he is occasionally confronted with women who have a distorted view of what their genitals should look like. "Certainly some women are influenced by pornography and the media airbrushing of female genitalia, but if I believe anyone's expectations are too pie in the sky, I tell them and I

refuse to perform the surgery. Over the years I have turned away many disappointed girls. I won't do it unless I feel it is a deserving request," he says.

Vulva culture

It may sound like a lost cause, but cultural pressures may be mitigated by a fledgling sub-culture that seems to exist solely to celebrate female genitalia. Blog The Large Labia Project (largelabiaproject.org), for instance, encourages women to embrace 'the beauty of a large, long, thick, fleshy vulva' by posting photos of theirs. The comments that accompany these images describe the emotional anguish many of them have gone through. "I've gotten a few rude comments about it. The one that bothered me the most was the assumption that because my lips are larger it must mean I've had lots of sex, and partners," writes one blogger.



Werner says he has had a largely positive response to his book. "Mostly, people are grateful and appreciative. To have the opportunity to confront their own perception and have this taboo topic normalised in such a powerful, positive and empowering way has obviously been a moving experience for a lot of people," he says.

Exposure to diversity can only be helpful, says Cameron. "Women stand to gain much

greater happiness and body acceptance when they stop seeing their vaginas as aesthetic objects and instead as sites of pleasure and physical function." **Name has been changed* ■

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