The Vagina, More than a "Penis Receptacle": Sexual Function Representations in Anatomy and Physiology Textbooks

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Introduction

- A comprehensive understanding of sexual health is intrinsically linked to physiological and psychological wellbeing.
- Sexual function, defined as “a person’s ability to respond sexually or experience sexual pleasure,” is an important dimension of sexual health.
- Access to accurate and representative information about sexual function is necessary for a well-rounded understanding.
- Previous studies have shown a disparaging and incomplete information when it comes to sexual function’s representation in Anatomy and Physiology (A&P) textbooks.
- A&P courses attract future healthcare practitioners, who need the ability to speak to patients about their sexual health in an inclusive manner.

Research Goal

Identify how sexual function is represented in the most widely used undergraduate A&P textbooks

Methods

- Surveyed A&P instructors for common textbooks
- Analyzed 14 common textbooks
- Used emergent thematic analysis
- Developed codebook
- Coded all data with multiple researchers

Textbooks Included Multiple Instances of the Three-function Description:

- “Sexual intercourse, also known as coitus (KÔ- i-tus) or copulation, introduces semen into the female reproductive tract” (Book 8)
- “Sexual intercourse- The insertion of the erect penis of a male into the vagina of a female. Also called coitus (KÔ- i-tus)” (Book 11)
- “We also look at how various reproductive organs secrete hormones that play major roles in maintaining normal sexual function, allowing these gametes to come together to form new” (Book 6)

Results & Findings

Textbooks Described the Vagina’s Function in Three Ways:

- Receptacle for the penis
- Outlet for menstrual flow
- Birth canal

Conclusions

- Analysis of undergraduate A&P textbooks revealed an incomplete and restrictive approach to describing sexual function, supporting previous findings.
- The vagina was described in most textbooks as only having three main functions, none of which included sexual pleasure.
- These three main functions exemplify sexual health descriptions using heteronormative and reproductive language.
- Diversification of sexual function and sexual intercourse representations should be added to textbooks including:
  - Adding sexual pleasure as a main function of the vagina
  - Broadening the definition of sexual intercourse beyond the current heteronormative lens

Acknowledgements

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References


Number of times each textbook described the vagina using the three ways (above).

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Examples of Textbook Descriptions of Sexual Intercourse and Sexual Function:

- “Sexual intercourse, also known as coitus (KÔ-i-tus) or copulation, introduces semen into the female reproductive tract” (Book 8)
- “Sexual intercourse- The insertion of the erect penis of a male into the vagina of a female. Also called coitus (KÔ-i-tus)” (Book 11)
- “We also look at how various reproductive organs secrete hormones that play major roles in maintaining normal sexual function, allowing these gametes to come together to form new” (Book 6)