

A Quest for Better Sex Meets 'Not Now, Dear'

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Most people reach their sexual peak at a time when, to put it charitably, they don't always make the best use of their libido.

My patient Dan, a 53-year-old in perfect physical health, refers to this as biology's cruel joke, meaning now that he really knows what he wants in life, he would love to recapture some of his youthful sexual vigor and put it to good use.

After years of psychotherapy, he had never felt more satisfied: he was at his pinnacle professionally and had a wife and three children whom he clearly adored. One day in therapy he asked me, "Do you think I could get some Viagra?"

I don't consider myself the least bit puritanical, but I'm usually in the business of making the sick better, not making the normal better than well. When I asked him why, he admitted there was no problem; he just wanted to jazz things up.

"Is your wife complaining about sex?" I asked.

"Oh, no, she seems very happy with the status quo. We have sex about once a week and maybe more on vacation," he said. "Besides, what's the harm? So many of my friends use Viagra for a security blanket or a boost."

The session ended without resolution, and he did not bring up the subject until a month later. Smiling, he told me that he had gotten a Viagra prescription from his internist. He assumed I would disapprove. I didn't; I was just curious if there was a problem in his relationship that sent him in search of sexual enhancement. It turns out that there wasn't. What bothered Dan was "just" the normal decline in sexual performance with age.

Several months later, he came in complaining that he and his wife had been fighting — the first time in years. Apparently, she felt he had become more sexually demanding, something she did not welcome.

He was stunned. After all, he had simply taken a pill to make sex better and who could argue with that? What he had not taken into account was that his newfound sexual vigour had changed his relationship with his wife. She was perfectly happy with her affectionate, laid-back, middle-aged husband; she had no desire for a sexual athlete as a partner at this point in her life. Viagra had become an intruder in their intimate life.

My patient is nothing if not persistent, so he went on a crusade to see if he could find a female equivalent of Viagra, thinking that it would level the playing field and set things right.

Even if his wife had shared this goal — she did not — there is nothing that medicine yet has to offer women that even comes close to Viagra and its ilk. The

pharmaceutical industry has invested heavily in drugs like Viagra and Levitra for men with sexual dysfunction — or for enhancement, as many actually use them.

With the exception of estrogen, a hormone with some potentially serious adverse effects, there are few drugs that can increase female sexual function. In fact, most drugs that address female reproductive biology restrain it, in the form of birth control. And while Viagra and drugs like it do not directly increase libido, they can indirectly encourage it by improving erectile function.

Dan was loath to give up his new vigour. If he couldn't get her a remedy, he just hoped that with time his wife would adjust to her rejuvenated husband. Dead wrong. His exhausted wife finally lost her patience and told him that he had to stop the Viagra if he cared about their marriage.

I admit that I was surprised at how disruptive this little blue pill had become. As a psychiatrist and psychopharmacologist, I'm well aware of the side effects that drugs can cause in my patients. Who would have imagined that a drug that most consider so helpful, if not harmless, could stir up such trouble in a relationship? I certainly hadn't. When last I saw Dan, he ruefully told me that he had not renewed his Viagra prescription.