

Part B Submission

Applicant: Gemma Sharp

Title: Psychological Motivations and Outcomes of Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery

1. Briefly describe your research (maximum 400 words)

Labiaplasty is the most common form of female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS) and involves the surgical reduction of the labia minora. The procedure has become increasingly popular in Western countries, including Australia. A recent audit of labiaplasty procedures performed in public and private hospitals in NSW revealed a 64% increase from 256 procedures in 2001 to 421 in 2013. Professional medical organisations throughout the Western world have expressed serious concerns about the increasing number of adolescent and women undergoing FGCS as it is not medically indicated, and long-term safety and effectiveness data are lacking. My research project examined the factors promoting the increased interest in labiaplasty, and also the psychological outcomes of this procedure through a series of studies, with several being world-first studies. My findings showed that exposure to genital images in the media, in particular on the internet and in pornography, was the strongest influence on women's dissatisfaction with their genital appearance, and, in turn, their decision to undergo labiaplasty. The other major decisional influence was receiving negative comments about genital appearance, usually from sexual partners. This may be the result of the sexual partner also being influenced by media images. As a result of these findings, I examined the effectiveness of online resources aimed at educating women about the paucity of diverse female genital appearances shown in the media. The results showed that a short video was able to significantly improve women's perceptions of genital appearance diversity and so this video could potentially be used as an educational tool in sexual education classes in schools.

My research investigating the psychological outcomes of labiaplasty showed that women were generally satisfied with the change in their genital appearance after surgery. However, this did not lead to improvements in their psychological well-being or the quality of their intimate relationships. In fact, my research was the first to show that women who were involved in an intimate relationship prior to surgery and were experiencing greater preoperative psychological distress were more likely to be dissatisfied with their surgical results. These women may have had unrealistic expectations for improvements in these domains and so this research has helped to alert physicians to these key discussion points with preoperative patients. Overall, my findings suggest ways in which genital appearance dissatisfaction could be addressed in a non-surgical manner. In addition, the findings identify factors which could help with the assessment of patient suitability for labiaplasty.

2. Describe how your research illustrates Innovation, Best Practice or Excellence (maximum 200 words)

My research demonstrates excellence in mental health research in a number of ways:

- I won the 2015 Elaine Dignan Award (presented by the APS Women and Psychology Interest Group) in recognition of the significance and contribution of my research to women's mental health.
- To date, of the seven first-author articles I have produced from this research, three have received Editor's Choice article honours from the *Aesthetic Surgery Journal*.

- I was a grand finalist in the 2013 Trans-Tasman 3-Minute Thesis competition (explaining your research project in 3-minutes).
- My research has been presented in national and international mainstream media (television, radio and print). Highlights include appearing as an expert guest panellist on the SBS TV show “Insight”, presenting on ABC RN’s “The Science Show”, interviews with BBC radio, and writing an article for “The Conversation”.
- I have presented studies from this specific project at nine national and international conferences, including two invited guest speaker presentations.
- As “the leading expert internationally” on the topic of FGCS (according to one of my PhD thesis examiners), I have been asked to design professional development materials for health professionals so they can better manage the increasing patient demand for FGCS.

3. Summarise the potential contribution to and/or implications for society (maximum 200 words)

The number of adolescent and adult women experiencing genital appearance concerns and requesting labiaplasty has increased rapidly in Australia. A recent survey of Australian GPs found that 97% had been asked by patients about genital appearance normality and 54% had seen patients requesting FGCS. As FGCS is not medically indicated and potential side effects include infection, loss of sensation, painful sexual intercourse and scarring, it is concerning that FGCS is increasing in popularity. My research, which was cited in the world-first GP guidelines for FGCS, contributes to our understanding of the sociocultural factors promoting this demand. My research also showed that women’s understanding of the diversity in normal genital appearance could be significantly improved with a short video. Such a resource could be used in clinical settings as well as in schools to help to prevent the development of genital appearance concerns in younger girls. My research investigating the patient characteristics which predict dissatisfaction with surgical outcomes may also help health professionals identify women who are less likely to benefit from surgery. More generally, being invited to present my research in mainstream media has seemingly helped to lessen the social stigma surrounding the topic of female genital appearance.

4. Describe any contribution by Mental Health consumers/persons with lived experience other than as subjects (e.g. reference group, researcher) (Maximum 200 words)

Owing to the highly sensitive nature of my research topic, women are often very hesitant to talk to anyone about their experience with labiaplasty. Involving a sufficient number of women as research participants was highly challenging. However, one brave woman (“Emma”) accompanied me on my guest appearance on the SBS TV show “Insight” (27/09/2016). Emma was not involved in my research but had had a labiaplasty at a collaborating clinic. To my knowledge, Emma was the first woman to appear on Australian television and speak about her experience with labiaplasty. Her appearance finally put a face to this growing population of women who are concerned about their genital appearance. Through Emma’s presentation, I think it was clear to the audience that these women are not vacuous and superficial. They are intelligent women who have usually experienced distressing events related to their genital appearance and labiaplasty is seemingly a solution to this distress. After in-depth discussions with Emma, I was able to propose strategies for how her genital appearance distress may have been alleviated without surgery and this informed my future research proposal involving the design of a psychoeducational intervention for girls and women with genital appearance concerns.