

Equalities in Mental Health

Sexuality and Ageing

Workshop 5

Polly Kaiser and Mike Morley

February 2010

# Sexuality and Ageing

- Polly Kaiser, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust, Oldham, and National Lead for Mental Health in Later life MHE/NMHDU
- Dr. Mike Morley, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust.

# Sexuality and Ageing

- This workshop aims to provide a space to become aware of attitudes and stereotypes associated with ageing and sexuality. It will include the experiences and voices of older people via audio and video tape.
- To lead a summary and discussion regarding the relevance of this for working with older people.
- To provide brief handout with key references

# Sexuality and Ageing

## overview of workshop

- Introductions
- Attitude exercise
- Audiotape presentation, video tape presentation, and discussion session
- Handout – lecture material, some references

# Sexual Activity and older adults

*‘ Older people weren’t asked in surveys about their sexual activity because everyone knew that they had none, and they were assumed to have none because nobody asked. ’*

*Alex Comfort (1972)*

# Sexuality and Ageing

- **Sexual Health** - "A state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being related to sexuality; not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be protected, respected and fulfilled".

World Health Organisation 2001

# Sexuality and Ageing

- National Service Framework for Older Adults (2001) – does not mention sexual health.
- National Sexual Health Strategy (2001): initial and current focus on unwanted pregnancy, HIV, STI – up to age 40 yrs. Recent Equality Impact assessment has underscored that STI's on increase in older adults.
- There is evidence that limited attention paid to sexuality in health and social care settings, even when this is a likely factor of care – e.g. ovarian cancer
- The limited literature in this area suggests that health and social care professionals often aware of the 'need', but cite reasons such as 'not my job', or lack of training, as barriers

# Sexuality and Ageing

- *‘...Placing older people (indeed those from 45 years upwards) outside the remit of national, population-based surveys of sexuality and sexual health issues serves not only to reinforce the notion that sex is not relevant to older people but is a blatant denial of an important public health issue...’*
- *The issue of sexuality, sexual health and older people appears to be another domain, which has been deeply infiltrated by ageism among health professionals...*

*Bouman, Arecelus and Benbow (2006)*



Guiding  
values

## The guiding values that underpin New Horizons:

- equality, justice and human rights
- reaching our full potential
- being in control of our lives
- valuing relationships

# Summary and conclusions

- Sexuality is a much broader concept than simply the capacity to have sex and sexual relationships, and is linked to many aspects of identity and psychological well being, including how we define and experience our lives in the contexts of health, illness and adversity.
- There is a ‘tendency’ for younger individuals to assume that the sexuality and sexual behaviour of older people is very limited or non-existent.
- There is evidence of ageism towards older people when it comes to sexuality in an almost complete lack of focus in this area in significant policy documents.
- The research literature in general identifies older people as a richly diverse group of individuals, many of whom live active and fulfilled lives.

# Sexuality and Ageing

- The research literature on sexuality in old age is in the main restricted to sex as a function, and in general there is evidence that male and female sexual function undergoes a gradual and steady decline from the age of fifty onwards.
- While this same literature on sexuality in old age clearly demonstrates that many older people maintain an active interest in sex well into their 90's one must also be mindful when considering the individual of the possibility of loss/lack of function, or of a partner, and potential reduction in opportunity (eg older women over the age of 75 years) .
- There is evidence of negative attitudes and ageism towards sexuality and old age among health and social care professionals that can be a significant barrier in case and care management.

# Sexuality and Ageing- Bibliography

The following are useful textbooks for an introduction to the issues on ageing and sexuality, plus some policy documents cited in the workshop:

Gibson, HB (1992) *The Emotional and Sexual Lives of Older People*. Chapman and Hall London

Gibson, H. B. (1997) *Love in Later Life* Peter Owen Publishers, London.

Gott, M (2005) *Sexuality, Sexual Health and Ageing*. Open University Press

Department of Health (2001a) *National Service Framework for Older People*. London HMSO (Available through [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk))

Department of Health (2001b) *National Sexual Health Strategy*. London HMSO (Available through [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk))

# Sexuality and Ageing

Dr Mike Morley and Polly Kaiser have a collection of scientific articles and textbooks relating to sexuality and ageing. If you would like more information after today's workshop please contact either of us:

Dr Mike Morley: Dept of Clinical and Health Psychology, Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust, Rawnsley Building, Manchester Royal Infirmary, Oxford Rd, Manchester M13 9WL 0161 276 5365 ; [Mike.Morley@mhsc.nhs.uk](mailto:Mike.Morley@mhsc.nhs.uk)

Polly Kaiser: Mental Health in Later Life National Equality Programme/NMHDU  
c/o NHS North West, 4th Floor, 3 Piccadilly Place, Manchester, M1 3BN  
[polly.kaiser@nmhdu.org.uk](mailto:polly.kaiser@nmhdu.org.uk);

Polly Kaiser, Mike Morley Feb 24<sup>th</sup> 2010