

Secrets of a sexy old age

By Ruth Ostrow

A FEW years ago, I hosted a national radio program on Triple M called The Sex Show. It was a show about sex and relationships pitched at the younger listener who liked to rock'n'roll. But every week the switchboard would light up with male and female callers in their twilight years sharing secrets about the best sex they ever had, the most exotic place they ever made love, and other steamy topics.

One week a 75-year-old woman rang to tell me her fantasy was to have her left buttock tattooed. Another in her 80s rang to tell me that she stimulated her husband's libido by doing "the dance of the seven veils" -- naked.

Meanwhile, I received this letter from a Tasmanian man: "Dear Ruth, At 78, my wife and I enjoy active living -- bowls, hiking, debating, gardening and church. Sexuality we accept as a wonderful part of our 50 years of marriage. With no set timetable for 'performance', and no inhibitions, the sheer delight of loving is ours. No hang-ups over previous encounters, no fantasies, nothing kinky. But the thrilling union of lovers is ours to relish, and keep looking forward to daily." I have had an insider's insight into older sexuality from this vantage point. Thus I was heartened by Kate Legge's wonderful article in The Weekend Australian Magazine, Love Springs Eternal, a few weeks ago, which confirmed the passionate love lives we are able to experience as we grow older.

In her article, she explains that the rise in over-50s presenting with sexually transmitted diseases has prompted calls for safe-sex campaigns to be targeted at grandparents. Nursing homes are developing guidelines for patients' sexual and sensual needs.

And campaigners such as health consultant Catherine Barrett and Melbourne psychologist Claire Hetzel are trying to raise public awareness about this much-denied aspect of elderly life.

Legge writes: "Bowling greens are rich with possibilities for repartnering because deaths are more often timely than tragic, and funerals clear the decks for musical chairs without the mess of divorce, child maintenance and acrimony ..."

Having recently admitted my own mother-in-law into a nursing home, I now have first-hand experience of the love wrestles that go on.

Over lunch I watched a serious cat-spat between five 80-year-old women who were fighting over one man and where he should sit.

I was told by a nurse that this man had been playing the field, pitting "the girls" off against each other for his attentions, and having the absolute time of his life. When I wrote a column about women in their 30s and 40s, and how at this time the female body becomes flushed with libidinous hormones as a biological "last hurrah" before menopause, I received several angry letters from women in their 60s and 70s, chastising me for not acknowledging their sexuality: "Forget about plunging into menopause. Sex is better than it's ever been," wrote one.

Meanwhile, men have often written to me with gems such as this: "I am in my 70s. I have fantasised about all my neighbours in my street, all the women I meet in the course of the day while shopping or going to a club. It consists of slowly removing their clothes and kissing and stroking the delightful velvet skin ..." He then goes on to describe his sexual exploits in vivid detail.

My own empirical observations as a former sex and relationships journalist certainly confirm the research presented by Victor Minichiello, from the University of New England, who claims that 66 per cent of men and 33 per cent of women over 65 are sexually active.

In fact, from my reader-listener response over the years, I would wager that the statistic for female sexuality is even higher but that women of that generation are too embarrassed to admit to masturbating or being "naughty".

I'm not surprised by the facts that have come to light as a result of sexual health consciousness. But what does amaze me is that we continue to talk about our elderly brethren as "they".

They are "us". We are going to be "them" one day. And are we going to be essentially different from who we are now? I still sometimes feel like a little girl inside. Does the decaying of skin decay the soul? Will my ageing shrivel my sensuality, my eroticism, my desire to savour life? I hope not.

I'm so thrilled the topic is out in the open. Thrilled that there are moves afoot to make nursing homes more sex-friendly. Thrilled that we've been given hope that it isn't all going to end in bedpans and nappies.

The amusing, Pythonesque element that the notion of elderly sex engenders has to gently be put aside to embrace a new model of continued sexual pleasure beyond the confines of smooth skin. The mood we create now about this delicate topic is the one we will inherit in the coming decades.

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 19 OCT 2002