

Article Title: "Clitoris - The Story"

It is one of sexuality's best kept secrets. Kristina Hultman searches for and uncovers the truth in the findings of an Australia-based researcher. Findings that definitely suggest a Nobel Prize.

Imagine a body part. The pancreas or liver. Now imagine that despite thousands of years of medical research, no one understands how it really works. That pretty much sums up the situation for the clitoris, the world's most unexplored and misunderstood body organ. Or more accurately, that was the situation until a urologist in Australia started researching the matter about ten years ago. So now we know what the clitoris looks like. She should be awarded a Nobel Prize. Permit me to recap.

In Antiquity, philosophers such as Aristotle believed that women had a "tube" like a penis, the difference being that it was inside out and inside the body. They believed that women "breathed" in through this tube via a small "gate" located just above the urethra, which changed appearance when they were aroused. The Greeks called this opening kleitoris, "the little hill".

This perception reigned until the Renaissance, which saw advances in the discipline of anatomy. Men such as Leonardo da Vinci dissected the bodies of executed criminals, who were mostly men. The ones who could have offered an alternative perception, women, were banned from universities and would remain so for three hundred years. Men were the standard for human beings.

They did see the clitoris, of course - on living women if not elsewhere. And the occasional corpse of an executed female could always be found. But in the quest to find answers to the mysteries of sexuality, they focused on correspondences and similarities between the sexes. Furthermore, the clitoris was not important - it was eventually concluded - for reproduction and child birth. Just a bit of extra tissue. A part of the body that required no attention at all. Research about the clitoris became taboo.

Women from the higher social classes were considered an interesting study around the close of the 19th century; their behaviour was so peculiar. Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytical successors diagnosed them as being hysterical, after the Latin word for uterus. Scientists no longer talked about "the little hill" like the ancient Greeks. A mature woman enjoyed vaginal intercourse. End of story.

Sexual starvation is probably a better name for what was ailing these women. Victorian bourgeois women – who never got to have sex, either with themselves or with others – quite simply grew sick and were occasionally treated with vaginal massage and uterus massage. With electricity came the massage apparatus – a treatment considered to be beneficial (!).

Ellinor Isfors is a sexual counsellor at the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU) in Stockholm and a psychologist. She also answers questions for Swedish Radio's education programme, Ramp.

What status does the clitoris have among young people today?

First she sighs and then replies that the biggest problem today is that the adult world and pornography is so penetration fixated.

“Of course, young girls and boys know that the clitoris exists, even if they often believe it is called killtoris.” (Translator comment – The Swedish word for boy is kille, compare with killtoris).

According to Isfors, the problem is that young women set aside what they know they find enjoyable as soon as they have sex with someone, particularly if they have sex with boys. They are willing to compromise on things that they know about themselves.

“They know what they like when they masturbate,” explains Isfors. “But then, when they have sex with someone, it’s like they enter a totally different world. They don’t want to convey the uncomfortable “sorry, it’s not good enough” signal to the boy. They haven’t understood the role of the clitoris. They assume that the boy knows and they make him responsible for sex. He’s supposed to know what to do. Plus, they’re afraid to ask for more stimulation. They haven’t even considered satisfying themselves.”

Instead, intercourse is expected to last a long time and be rough. Everyone knows that. And even if they are in pain several days afterwards, girls write to Isfors that "it was really good". She says that girls and boys share the same perception here.

American Beverly Whipple is a sexologist and former nurse. In the mid-90s she launched the concept of “outercourse” as a pleasurable alternative to “intercourse” in an attempt to redirect the focus from vaginal intercourse to the clitoris. Her success rate was so-so. Her equally fearless and uncompromising sister is the private practicing sex educator Betty Dodson from New York, author of the bestseller “Sex for one”. Using a 220 volt Eroscillator and The Magic Wand, she has ignited feminist sexual rights movements in the USA since the 1970s. Why all the talk that sex has to be natural? What difference does it make if you reach an orgasm using a vibrator, tongue, hands, vagina or penis? "An orgasm is an orgasm is an orgasm", declares Dodson.

She thereby manages to stick a hole in one of the most long-standing sexual fantasies of all: that a woman must have a penis in her vagina to be sexually satisfied and that this is what a woman most enjoys. Because that isn’t true. But who wants to know?

In the book "The Clitoral Truth - the Secret World at your Fingertips", Rebecca Chalker describes the basics that were taught when the feminist sex revolution gained momentum in the USA in the early 1970s:

1. Get to know yourself.
2. Take control over yourself and your own body.
3. Look.

Those were different times. Women had had enough of romanticising prostitution and penetration pornography. Lesbian and heterosexual women exchanged their experiences (yes, and argued too). The clitoris was to be afforded a new status. Women began feeling increasingly proud of what they had between their legs. Plastic speculums – a device used to spread open the vagina in order to see inside it properly - were handed out at women's seminars like ballpoint pens.

In the midst of everything the American National Organisation for Women (NOW) was planning the first conference about the red-hot theme of female sexuality. Why not show a little “split beaver” someone suggested. Let us become cunt positive, cunt

promoting, and create an aesthetic for female genitals.  
And thus was created the first American – collective – feminist pornography.

They trimmed and compared, studied and discussed, and made special cunt portraits of Marilyn, Tracy and all the other women who volunteered. Portraits which all included the clitoris, of course. It was possible to reach sexual pleasure if you knew what your own clitoris felt like, what it looked like and how it functioned. That was the idea. Betty Dodson: "We discovered when the hood was pulled back and each clitoris appeared that the variations were astounding – from tiny seed pearls to rather large protruding jewels. In the dictionary, phallus refers to both the penile glans and the clitoral glans. We were changing our image from the Female Eunuch to the Phallic Woman. The distance of the clitoris from the vaginal opening also varied greatly. One woman with a clit close to her vagina said she could orgasm with intercourse alone. I thought I'd discovered a new theory until a woman with the same configuration posed and she said she always needed direct clitoral stimulation to have an orgasm.

“Another woman couldn't get her clitoris to pop out. She was convinced she didn't have one until she pressed a finger on either side of the clitoral shaft. We could just see the tip of her shy clit. Technically called an “embedded clitoris”, it was difficult to see, but it was easy to feel and worked just fine.” (Quote from the book *Sex for One*, 1996)

And then there was Shere Hite, of course. The year was 1976. Her report on female sexuality hit like a bomb. What she said was:

1. There is nothing wrong with women.
2. It is society that has a problem.
3. Women can easily reach orgasm through self stimulation.
4. Society has a problem accepting the way in which women reach orgasm.
5. This needs to change.

Thousands of “ordinary” women were interviewed. The facts were in, the focus was on the entire female genital organ, including the clitoris. But how to describe it?

The female culture scene exploded. Female artists did the splits. Suddenly there were cunts and clitorises everyone. Before this, Georgia O'Keeffe's flowers were, well quite simply, flowers. And as if this was not enough, advocates pushed the issue that a woman's right to her clitoris was a human right.

The bravest in this field was physician and author Nawal El Saadawi who, during this period and on the same topic as Hite in the USA, spread ideas about women's sexuality - and perhaps particularly women's right to the existence and recognition of the clitoris - in Egypt. She was openly addressing the issue of genital mutilation.

Her non-fiction book “*Women and Sex*” was published in 1972 and followed by the novel “*The Hidden Face of Eve*” in 1977. It was in the latter that she broached female genital mutilation (FGM). This was an historic and literary accomplishment for which she was ostracised, dismissed from her position as a public health official and witnessed the banning of her books in her homeland.

The following quote is from the Swedish evening paper *Aftonbladet*, 26 July 2006: “It was only after I was accepted on the medical programme and started studying anatomy that I realised the function of the uterus in the female body and fully understood the correlation with menstruation. Female circumcision was however a non-issue. Sexual education was not

part of the curriculum and the clitoris was not even mentioned, either in the English or Arabic course literature. Nor was the hymen. We only studied female reproduction organs, such as the uterus and the ovaries.”

Five years after Hite, Maj-Brith Bergström-Walan and Helle Höphner Nielsen copied her survey and interviewed 4,000 Swedish women. They used the same questionnaire and reached similar conclusions.

“Manual Clitoris Stimulation” had a separate chapter in the Swedish women's report, but it also included something else. For many women, the clitoris was "only" for initial arousal, wrote the authors. "They wanted to reach an actual orgasm with the penis in their vagina". And that was that.

Certainly, the Swedish feminist sexual political scene differs from that in the USA. More work-hour oriented, day-care promoting, and targeted at men. When Louise Waldén, an active Group 8 member, visited the USA in the early 1970s, she was shocked. I know because she told me herself. “We are not like them”, she told her sisters when she returned. In Sweden the issue was a battle between the sexes. Pain-free childbirth. Not much collaboration with the Lesbian Front. And of course, this was all important, but sex for women's own sake fell by the wayside. Being a woman meant being a mother. What women with different sexual experiences could learn from each other when it came to the clitoris, for example, was not utilised.

And in all honesty, the female sexual liberation process that had been raging for some time in Sweden meant that severing ties with the past did not have to be as brutal in Sweden as in the sexually prudish, housewife-dense USA.

So what's the situation for the clitoris today? On the one hand, it is promising since research now confirms what the sex positive feminists of the '70s already knew. On the other hand, it is taking a remarkably long time for the new insights to gain ground. Pornography has a more hostile attitude to the female body and is more adapted to patriarchal phallic fantasies than perhaps ever before. The tradition of female genital mutilation continues, though not as widespread. And so on.

Moreover, from a medical science perspective we live in a gender-conservative era that still (hello!) feels that research concerning the female body should generally only concern reproduction and childbirth. Which brings me to my exception. To the woman who lives in Australia. The woman who should be awarded the Nobel Prize.

It was in the 1990s that the young medical student and budding urologist Helen O'Connell, practicing at the university in Melbourne, started taking a serious scientific interest in the clitoris. At that point she was basically the first to do so since the days of Aristotle. Other than a few feminists in 1970s, no one had bothered.

O'Connell suspected early in her training as an urologist that the anatomy books had missed something in regards to the clitoris. The young student was also troubled by what she was seeing in the education programmes.

Her superiors took greater consideration to men, when performing surgeries for prostate cancer, for example, and did everything to ensure that male patients retained as much of their sexual function as possible. As far as she could see, the same consideration did not extend to women when surgical procedures were performed.

As a physician and scientist she began researching this body part more systematically and soon found that the clitoris was not “the little hill”, but more a mountain.

Inside, the clitoris was a much larger structure than could be suspected from the outside. It wraps around the vagina and the urethra. The external head is attached to a body, which has two arms (bulbs) that swell when stimulated.

In addition, Helen O’Connell found that the clitoris is tied up with other organs, particularly urologic organs, and that it goes right back into the body. She believes that Doctor Gräfenberg’s spot may be an extra sensitive area along the upper wall of the vagina precisely due to its immediate connection with the nerves and body of caverns that make up the clitoral complex.

Given this new information, viewing female orgasms as either clitoral based or vaginal was about as meaningful as “barking up the wrong tree” as O’Connell put it when she was interviewed after she and her fellow scientists published their latest findings in the *Journal of Urology* in the spring of 1998. In August the same year, the news was spreading beyond the world of research via the magazine *New Scientist*. O’Connell is not a sexologist, a fact she is careful to point out. But shouldn’t vaginal and clitoral orgasms be seen as varieties within one and the same system?

If applied, her research would also have ramifications for pelvic surgery, cancer treatment, prolapse surgery, and so on. For women subjected to genital mutilation, these new findings might mean that all hope of sexual pleasure is not necessarily lost, not with an organ that is so large and that goes so deeply into the body.

O’Connell’s research has generated a new, complete picture of the clitoris, one in which it is much larger and much more decisive for women’s sexual pleasure and health than previously realised. The new magnetic imaging technology, MRI, was imperative to these new findings since it made it possible to study the body’s inner organs on live subjects. Helen O’Connell is worth a Nobel Prize, I thought, and called Hans Jörnvall, a member of the Nobel Prize Committee for Medicine to inquire if she is even being considered. “We are always interested in all fields”, answers Jörnvall diplomatically. “We consider the results when evaluating the research.”

However, it takes about 50 years before it is disclosed whether a person has been nominated or not. So unfortunately, he is unable to say if O’Connell’s name is in the pipeline, but he does feel that the field of sexology as such has received quite a lot of attention, and cites examples like the effects of pharmaceuticals, transplants and new surgical methods. Nor would the Nobel Prize Committee be swayed by external reactions from, for example, conservative religious fractions if a researcher who focused on the clitoris received the Nobel Prize. “We are not particularly religious”, he comments and laughs.

And so, in conclusion, Sigmund Freud’s old hypothesis; the one that says that the clitoris is “in the wrong place”. There’s only one person to quote in response, namely sexologist and midwife Tina Nevin. Second only to Maj-Brith Bergström-Wallan, she is the person who has done the most to heighten clitoris awareness in Sweden through her lectures on clitoris bulbs and cunt facts. Tina Nevin puts it like this:

“In the wrong place? Those of us who have one and give birth are very glad that it is not

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inside the vagina. It wouldn't work since the vagina cannot be too sensitive. Besides, it is extremely easy to reach with your hand. It would be much harder to reach it if it were inside your body."