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Review

Sexuality in burn victims: An integrative literature review



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ABSTRACT

Aims: To analyze and synthesize knowledge concerning sexuality in adult burn victims through an integrative literature review.

Method: Two researchers independently searched six electronic databases (PUBMED, LILACS, ISI Web of Science, PSYCINFO, CINAHL and EMBASE) and also performed a hand search using the following descriptors, in different combinations: burn, sexuality, gender identity, sexual behavior and sexual factors, in order to identify the articles published in English, Portuguese or Spanish, in the last 20 years. A total of 1781 articles were found and 22 were selected based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Results: The findings were organized into two categories that influence sexuality: (1) studies where the main purpose was to assess sexuality in burn victims; (2) studies that indirectly assess sexuality.

Conclusion: The synthesis of the knowledge concerning sexuality in burn victims showed that sexual dysfunction can be related to the younger ages, TBSA > 20%, burns on the genitalia and on exposed areas, prolonged length of hospital stay, avoidance coping, and mental disorders. The multidisciplinary team should be prepared to integrate sexuality as an important variable in the continuing treatment of burn patients.

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Contents

1. Introduction	553
2. Method	553
3. Results	554
3.1. Studies in which the main purpose was to assess sexuality in burn victims	555
3.2. Studies that indirectly assess sexuality	559
4. Discussion	559
5. Conclusion	560
References	560

1. Introduction

The skin is an essential organ in our body due to its protective and esthetic nature. Changes in the skin, especially those caused by disease, affect interaction between the mind and body. This interaction involves aspects of our personality and emotions. Changes in the appearance of a person's skin may hinder interpersonal relationships, especially sexual contact [1].

Human sexuality has been described in many ways and it is important to recognize it as a part of the human being. Over time, sexuality has received both repressive and liberating influences from cultural and social spheres, such as religion. It has been influenced by the sociocultural context and it is a complex and unstable phenomenon [2]. It is considered a deep aspect of the human and personal dimension and is related to three inseparable factors: biological, psychological, and social [3,4].

The biological factors associated with human sexuality are related to sexual desire, excitement and orgasm, that is, to the body's physiological sexual response. Psychological and social aspects are related to sexual self-image and self-conception, respectively, that is, how one sees herself/himself and how one behaves, according to gender and social context [3,4].

Sexuality is associated with personality, how we see ourselves as men and women, our verbal and non-verbal behavior, and also how we interact with others to achieve personal satisfaction. Even though sexuality is an important aspect of quality of life and one of the basic human needs, it is seldom studied, especially among people with chronic conditions [5] related to diseases or trauma, such as a burn. A burn is a trauma that may result in a chronic condition due to changes in skin and sequelae, and requires specific care for an individual to attain complete rehabilitation. A growing number of burn survivors with critical sequelae, have been observed due to the advancement of techniques and devices used in care provided to burn victims [6].

One of the changes experienced by a burn victim is related to body image, which may be associated with difficulties in social interaction with partners, family members, and in the initial contact with previously unknown people [7]. Most subjects of a recent study addressing burn patients reported they perceived their scars as deformities in their bodies, which they attempted to hide, referring to them in a derogatory manner [8].

Change in appearance and self-esteem can be associated with problems experienced by human beings, one of which is

sexuality [9]. A study [10] addressing young individuals, who were burn victims during childhood, shows that scarring on the face and amputation negatively affected sexual issues and the individuals' perceptions concerning being attractive to another person. The severity of the burn, age when the wound occurred or current age, were not significantly related to sexual activity [10]. Both, men and women can experience loss or decrease of sexual arousal. In a recent study with burn patients, women reported a greater decrease in sexual desire in the first year after a burn trauma than did men [11].

Psychopathologic (such as depression and post-traumatic stress), psychodynamic (such as changes in appearance, body structure and function) and physiological mechanisms (such as those associated with side effects of medicines) were related to sexual dysfunction in burn victims [12].

We observe in clinical practice that burn victims, of both genders, hope to return to their state prior to the trauma, that is, to what they consider to be normal in terms of appearance, performance of social roles, and functionality in general. According to Pandya et al. [13] there is no consensus among health professional on the assessment of sexuality in burn patients. The interest in this aspect seems to be associated with having been burned in the perineum [13].

Thus, it is important to conduct a literature review in order to identify the knowledge that has been published, in last 20 years, on the sexuality of burn victims in the rehabilitation phase. It is also necessary to systematize the knowledge concerning sexuality in burn victims, and provide to health staff knowledge for the development and implementation of effective rehabilitation programs that include the sexual dimension directed to the patient and family. The objectives of this study were to assess and synthesize the knowledge available about sexuality in adult burn victims through an integrative literature review.

2. Method

This is an integrative literature review, which refers to a research method that consists of acquiring a broad understanding of a given subject based on previous studies. It allows an extensive analysis of literature, collaborating in discussions of methodologies and the results of studies, as well as providing reflection upon potential studies [14]. This study was guided by the following stages: (1) establishment of a guiding question; (2) search for papers and selection criteria; (3) extraction of papers included in the integrative review; (4) assessment of papers included in the integrative review; (5)

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