

# Taking a risqué

Bronya Hirshman explores how the soft porn industry has driven the designer vagina trend

**J** when you've finally tamed your bed head and trotted kilometres in an attempt to outrun your ass, we learn that worrying about thunder thighs and saggy boobs is no longer enough. In our quest for supermodel perfection, we've found a whole new region to demonise. As if there weren't enough body parts to feel poorly about, it's now the turn of the vagina.

Forget a mere Brazilian wax or vajazzling (decorating the vulva and mond with glitter and stick-on jewels). Now women have turned to the scalpel to undergo a type of surgery which, according to the secretary of the Association of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons of South Africa, is fast gaining

popularity: labiaplasty or labial reduction. It would seem there are a growing number of women who are undergoing this type of surgery in an attempt to make their vaginas "more attractive". **Labial reduction** is not one type of operation. It includes a number of procedures which decrease the size of the labia minora, or "inner lips" of the vagina so that it looks like that of a pristine porn star.

It's one thing trimming the hedge, but as for trimming the ledge – why are women so prepared to chop off their fiddly bits? The reasons are far more complicated than one might imagine, but the most common one is that they believe their labia to be too large, too flappy and aesthetically displeasing.

Renowned South African plastic surgeon Dr Paul Scholl has performed an increasing number of these surgeries in his practice. "I think women shave or wax in a way that wasn't done before." The net result is that women can better view their genitals.

So when last did you actually take a look "down there" at your "vajayjay"? We're so coy about our genitalia that we can hardly name them, let alone look at them without feelings of shame and embarrassment. And now that fashion dictates no hair to conceal previously obscured bits, it's no wonder then that we want to alter our anatomy.



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### *Critical views*

Do you like what you see? If not, you're not alone. Labiaplasty is becoming more commonplace as women critically examine their vaginas. Sara\* was 17 when she first decided her labia minora were abnormal. "My first sexual encounter didn't involve penetration, but it did include humiliation. I heard after the encounter that he was 'sickened' by my weeping beef curtains. I had heard via a friend's friend, so it meant the whole school knew I was a freak."

### *There is no normal*

While we're seeking tidier, more uniform, culturally acceptable labia minora, the perfect vagina seems to be something of a myth. A study was undertaken in which a cross-section of women's genitals was measured. There was a wide range of variance. Age, sexual history, birthing and race played no part in determining the size of a woman's clitoris, the length of her labia or their width and colour. Each vagina was simply unique to each woman.

Hormonal changes around puberty result in the labia minora mostly elongating and protruding beyond the labia majora. Some women interpret these normal changes in their bodies as abnormal. It would seem that we are hailing the prepubescent, asexual vagina as the erotic standard.

The growing trend for vaginal cosmetic surgery has been met with a certain amount of trepidation amongst specialists and people who work within the field of sexuality. Andrew Barnes, who holds a master's degree in clinical sexology from the University of Sydney, Australia, has written numerous books on the subject and has studied and taught tantra for 20 years. In his work, he's seen more than a few thousand female genitals up close. "There isn't such a thing as normal. Just like fingerprints, just like nose shapes – everyone's genitals are individual to that person whether they are male or female. Diversity is what is normal."

Sara spent the next few years of school and university life covered up. "I wasn't neat and tidy like the other girls, I had 'rude lips' that sometimes poked out my panties and shamed me in the change room. I certainly didn't have a boyfriend. If a guy was interested in me I'd quickly change things to 'friendship'. I knew if we kissed he'd eventually want to have sex and then he'd see my hideous deformity."

Will this surgery make you sexier and give you more self-esteem, or is it yet another way for doctors to cash in on our insecurities? For around R15 000-R20 000 you can make your lady bits easier on the eye. The question is, whose eye?

Dr Scholl says most of the women who make appointments to see him "come in concerned they have

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some sort of abnormality. They just need reassurance that they are normal. There are no criteria or measurements in the literature to show what is normal or abnormal”.

Normal is by and large determined by our socio-cultural perspective. It seems odd that it's possible to correct anatomy surgically and make it “normal” if there is no normal. In Japan, for example, the “butterfly” look is considered aesthetically pleasing and in some parts of Africa, the labia are stretched from a young age to enhance their sexy ideal.

How then do you tell if your vagina needs a tidy?

## *Clam shells and Barbies*

In Western society, images of nudity are widely available through internet pornography. But according to Andrew, “the pornography and cosmetic industry only promote what's called the ‘clam shell’ or ‘Barbie doll’ look”, meaning that you can't see the inner labia from the outside. “As a result of that there is fear in a lot of women around the world that they don't look like the pictures they see and they worry that they may be abnormal. I don't believe that women have the full story about their genitals so as to be able to make an informed decision about surgery.”

Andrew believes that it is in fact censorship within mainstream media that is to blame. “In Australia and

numerous other countries, in soft porn magazines and even in women's magazines, you cannot show the inner labia of women's genitals.”

In order for these magazines to be allowed to be sold in a mainstream environment, a woman's inner labia are airbrushed out. As a result, “women are not getting to see a variety of normal women's genitals. The clamshell or Barbie look is normal for some women but not for all.”

## *Educated through porn*

In South Africa we follow international trends, only our mainstream retailers are even more conservative. Nudity for any reason is strictly prohibited due to the family values retailers encourage. The magazine industry must cover up or run the risk of being refused at delivery or being instructed to remove copies from shelves by the Film and Publications Board.

By default, porn has become our sex education. Some recent anatomical textbooks don't even include the clitoris. Furthermore there are very few studies of women's vulvas in medical literature. Yet even without this crucial information, surgeons still claim to be able to correct genital anatomy.

## *Botched jobs*

Vaginal rejuvenation and labiaplasty are relatively new to cosmetic surgery.

The surgery holds the promising allure of sexual enhancement, and functional and cosmetic improvement. But surgery can also negatively affect function. There isn't even an established standard of care or evidence-based outcome for this type of surgery. In 2007 the American College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists condemned this type of surgery, saying: “These procedures are not medically indicated, and the safety and effectiveness of these procedures have not been documented. Women should be informed about the lack of data supporting the efficacy of these procedures and their potential complications, including infection, altered sensation, dyspareunia [painful sexual intercourse], adhesions, and scarring.”

Dr Scholl has seen his share of botched surgeries. “With the popularity of this type of operation increasing with ‘everybody’ doing them, there are some real disasters out there. Principally from over removal of tissue.” He believes that no one *should have* the surgery. It's elective. You have it if it is such a problem for you that it is inhibiting your life. “If it bothers you so much you're prepared to go through an operation that is not essential – which is no joke – and you have the anatomy that will support that then I'll do it.”

### *Making an informed choice*

Sara investigated surgery extensively, but after coming across Andrew's book, *Heart of the flower*, she decided against it. "I could see how we are all just so unique." *Heart of the flower* is a coffee-table book of women's vulvas. The book aims to create a culture of acceptance and increase women's understanding of what "normal" actually is. "I guess I do have rude lips," she says. And her eyes light up as she adds, "Rude lips and great sex."

The perfect vagina might just be something you already have. There's no point in scouring the media to compare your vag. Porn, popular magazines and medical publications are unlikely to give you an accurate picture of what a real vagina looks like. If it works, feels healthy and is pleasurable, it's just fine. If your lover has any complaints about the appearance of your vagina, you should consider cutting him off, rather than your labia. **HI**

*\* Not her real name*

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*References available on request*