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Vulvology

A Proposal for a Multidisciplinary Subspecialty

Leonardo Micheletti, M.D., Mario Preti, M.D., Fabrizio Bogliatto, M.D., and Peter J. Lynch, M.D.

OBJECTIVE: To underline the usefulness of a new multidisciplinary subspecialty devoted entirely to vulvar diseases, to be termed vulvology.

STUDY DESIGN: Disorders of the vulva present a wide spectrum of clinical appearance, rendering clinical diagnosis difficult, if not impossible. The three types of physicians usually involved in treating the vulva (generalists, dermatologists and gynecologists) receive little training in and have little experience with vulvar problems. The end result is that women today are receiving far less than optimal care for vulvar disorders.

RESULTS: This situation can be much improved through the establishment of vulvology as a new multidisciplinary subspecialty. Vulvology can become a neutral field for research and debate and can provide a point of consolidation for all clinical care (infectious, metabolic, oncologic, neurologic, psychological, etc.) of vulvar disorders. The interdisciplinary nature of this new sub-

specialty will also facilitate the standardization and systematization of the currently confusing terminology and classification applicable to vulvar disorders.

CONCLUSION: Vulvology, as a new, well-defined, multidisciplinary subspecialty, will improve the care of women with vulvar problems through the delineation of vulvologists as physicians with special expertise in this

area, the establishment of clinics devoted specifically to the care of vulvar problems and the provision of education for physicians, other health care providers and the public. (J Reprod Med 2002;47:715-717)

Keywords: vulvar diseases, vulvar neoplasms, vulva, vulvology.

Introduction

Disorders of the vulva exist on a spectrum ranging from common, innocuous conditions to rare, inca-

The development and recognition of vulvology as a new subspecialty will markedly improve the care of women with vulvar problems.

From the Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics, University of Turin, Turin, Italy, and Department of Dermatology, University of California, Davis, Davis, California.

Drs. Micheletti and Preti are Gynecologists, Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics, University of Turin.

Dr. Bogliatto is Specialist Registrar, Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics, University of Turin.

Dr. Lynch is Professor and Chief, Department of Dermatology, University of California Davis.

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Address reprint requests to: Leonardo Micheletti, M.D., Largo Mentana 11, 10133 Turin, Italy.

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pacitating diseases. Moreover, because of heat and sweat retention in this area, itching is often present. The morphologic changes induced by scratching obscure diagnostic hallmarks, rendering clinical diagnosis difficult, if not impossible. These problems in diagnosis are further complicated by the fact that women, for reasons of embarrassment and/or convenience, often self-medicate. These nonprescription medications are often inappropriate and all too often lead to a delay in seeking medical attention. This often creates further clinical confusion and diagnostic difficulty. Finally, when medical care is eventually obtained, the patient still has no assurance that she will receive the best possible care given that the three types of physicians usually chosen (generalists, dermatologists and gynecologists) receive little training in and have little experience with vulvar problems. The end result is that women today are receiving far less than optimal care for their vulvovaginal disorders.

This situation is undesirable, unwarranted and remediable. Improvement will depend on the development of much greater interdisciplinary cooperation, standardization of terminology and systemization of the scattered medical knowledge of vulvar disease. Recent developments have led to some improvement in this situation, but optimization of care for vulvar problems will depend on the development of a multidisciplinary subspecialty devoted entirely to vulvar disease. We propose that this subspecialty be termed *vulvology* and that physicians practicing within this field be recognized as vulvologists.

Historical Aspects

The Early Years

Eduard G. Friedrich, a tremendously gifted physician and remarkable leader, noted in 1983¹: "Through the centuries, in the arts and in the sciences, the vulva has been richly ignored. It is really not surprising, then, that the vulva was accorded little attention by those who first began to apply science to medicine. Not until this century did things begin to change." During the first decades of the 20th century, medical textbooks seldom referred to problems involving the vulva, and even then only a few, poorly defined conditions (such as pruritus vulvae) were mentioned.

The first published recognition of vulvar disease as a specific entity did not occur until 1923, when Frederick Taussig, an American gynecologist, summarized the existing knowledge in this field in his

precedent-setting textbook, *Diseases of the Vulva*.² In addition, he recognized the multidisciplinary aspects of vulvar disorders and thus stated that because the vulva "occupies a borderland between dermatology and gynecology, diseases of the vulva have been insufficiently studied by workers in both specialties" This multidisciplinary point of view was subsequently recognized within the field of dermatology as well when, in 1940, Elizabeth Hunt, an Irish dermatologist working in England, wrote *Diseases Affecting the Vulva*, a monograph complementary to Dr. Taussig's.³ In the book Hunt stated that the text was written "in response to numerous requests from general practitioners and gynaecologists for a text-book on vulval affections from the standpoint of a dermatologist." Subsequently the number of published manuscripts on vulvar disorders increased slowly, but during the next 28 years no additional textbooks were written by either gynecologists or dermatologists.

The Modern Era

By the late 1960s, a burst of new interest in vulvar disease occurred. Within a 10-year period gynecologists, dermatologists and pathologists published five important new monographs. These included books in 1968 by Janowski and Douglas (gynecologists in Germany),⁴ in 1969 by Gardner and Kaufman (gynecologists in the U.S.),⁵ in 1970 by Huguier and Hewitt (dermatologists in France),⁶ in 1970 by Di Paola and Balina (gynecologist and dermatologist in Argentina)⁷ and in 1976 by Friedrich (gynecologist in the U.S.).⁸

More important, in 1970 a group of gynecologists who were especially interested in vulvar problems (including several of the authors mentioned above) met in New York City during the Sixth World Congress of International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics. At that meeting they agreed to found a multidisciplinary, multinational organization for the study of vulvar disease, the International Society for the Study of Vulvar Disease (ISSVD), and the bylaws they wrote declared that membership would include gynecologists, dermatologists and pathologists from countries throughout the world. The bylaws stated that the goals and purposes of the society were twofold: (1) to promote international communication among gynecologists, pathologists, dermatologists and physicians in related disciplines and to establish international agreement on terminology and definitions of vulvar diseases; and (2) to promote clinical investiga-

tion, basic research and dissemination of knowledge in this field.

Since its inception the ISSVD has prospered beyond the greatest expectations of the founders. Membership has grown to more than 250 individuals from some 30 different countries. International congresses, which have been very well attended, have been held every two years throughout the world. Many manuscripts based on presentations at these congresses have been published in the society's official journal, *The Journal of Reproductive Medicine*. Immediately following each congress, the members of the society have hosted highly successful postgraduate courses on vulvar disease for physicians from all disciplines. In addition to the five monographs mentioned above, at least 10 additional textbooks on various aspects of vulvar disease have been published by members of the ISSVD.⁸⁻¹⁷

The Future

We recognize that past efforts have gone a long way toward providing better care for women with vulvar disease, but more must be done and that the best way to do so is through the development of vulvology as a new subspecialty. New subspecialties appropriately develop, and then become officially recognized, when a critical mass of knowledge in a given area develops. Evidence that that has occurred for vulvar disease includes: (1) the presence of a successful organizational structure, the ISSVD, to support the field; (2) the offering of regularly scheduled postgraduate educational courses devoted to vulvar disease; (3) the identification of an official journal for the society; (4) the development of many multidisciplinary clinics for the care of patients with vulvar disorders; and (5) the publication of > 15 textbooks in the field of vulvar disease, with several of them now in second and third editions.

It is proper to ask what can be gained by the development of this new subspecialty. Official recognition of the subspecialty of vulvology will make it easier to (1) introduce vulvar disease course work (and possibly even fellowships) into the well-established training programs of both gynecologists and dermatologists, (2) facilitate the development of many more vulvology clinics within departments of gynecology and dermatology, (3) educate the public and medical world that these clinics are appropriate for care of otherwise-problematic vulvar disorders, (4) provide a focus

area on vulvar problems at regional, national and international gynecologic and dermatologic meetings, (5) assist in physician credentialing such that patients can be assured that those presenting themselves as vulvologists really have expertise in the area, (6) standardize and systematize the current confusing vulvar disease terminology and classification, and (7) provide a point of consolidation for the much-too-fragmented research related to all aspects (infectious, metabolic, oncologic, neurologic, psychological, etc.) of vulvar disorders. In short, the development and recognition of vulvology as a new subspecialty will markedly improve the care of women with vulvar problems. Surely this is a goal that all physicians, regardless of background, can and will support.

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