Reviewer's report

Title: Sexual function and chemotherapy in postmenopausal women with breast cancer

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Reviewer: Jennifer Jabson

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This paper, “Sexual function and chemotherapy in postmenopausal women with breast cancer”, reports the findings generated by a study of sexual function among breast cancer patients as compared to the sexual function reported by no-cancer controls. The study’s findings indicate that sexual function declines among breast cancer patients at two points, after diagnosis of breast cancer and after administration of systemic chemotherapy. This finding could be valuable for identifying the best possible points at which to provide cancer patients with resources that address concerns regarding sexual function during breast cancer treatment.

Major Concerns

The major and minor concerns identified in this paper are detailed below. Addressing these issues could strengthen this paper and improve the presentation of the study’s findings. One overarching concern is that the purpose of the study seems unclear. Clarifying this will strengthen the manuscript.

Introduction

• The overall research question(s) posed, and rationale, is unclear from the introduction. This could be resolved and strengthened through thoughtful reorganization and clarification.

• The meaning of the third sentence of the second paragraph is unclear. Clarify.

• The meaning of the fourth ‘paragraph’ (a single sentence) is unclear and its meaning should be clarified. Specifically, ‘…between treatments and symptoms remains controversial’ is unclear. What symptoms are being referenced? Post-menopausal symptoms? Sexual function? Clarification would improve this paragraph.

Methods

• A more clear description of the study design is needed. Typically when a nested cohort study, a randomly selected subset of controls from a ‘cohort’ are compared to incident cases. However, this manuscript does not report a description of the cohort. Clarification will strengthen the description of the study design.

• The inclusion of broad comments concerning the psychometric properties of the FSFI included on page3-4 is unclear. These would be more useful to readers if they were included in the methods section and should also include more detailed
information concerning reliability and validity.

• On page 5: Please provide detailed scoring information about how the FSFI is scored for each sub-domain and for ‘total’ FSFI scores.

• It is not clear from the methods section when the second surveys were administered. Please clarify when the survey was administered.

• It is not clear how many total women were approached to complete the survey, how many of these women agreed to volunteer, and how many were either excluded or refused participation. This information is essential for describing the sample and having some knowledge of to whom the results apply.

Results

• The results section should include the presentation of test statistics (t test values, chi-square values) alongside p-values.

• Page 7, paragraph 1: This paragraph could be strengthened if the control group’s ‘pre-post’ scores were also provided.

• Page 7, paragraph 3: The meaning of the second half of the second sentence in the paragraph is unclear.

• It could be valuable to combine tables. For example, a single table could present all of the bivariate relationships between FSFI and tumor stage, and demographic characteristics.

• Page 7, paragraph 11: Please clarify if ‘25% of participants’ refers to cases only or cases and controls.

Discussion

• The second paragraph in the discussion might present too far a reach from the findings of this research. It would be more useful to the reader if authors were able to discuss the findings in more detail here.

• Page 10, paragraph 2: “We believe that merely receiving a diagnosis of breast malignancy produces a significant sense of loss….” This discussion point, as it is presented in this paragraph, is impossible to know from this data presented or the findings generated by this study. To continue along this line of thinking authors should tie their thoughts to extent literature concerning the topic of sexual function after breast cancer diagnosis.

• Page 10, paragraph 5: In the methods section authors indicated that those with prior diagnoses were excluded. However in this paragraph ‘there was no significant association between reduction in FSFI scores and the prior diagnosis variable…’ Please clarify if those with prior diagnosis were excluded or included and/or which participants are being referred to in paragraph 5.

• The discussion could be strengthened if authors discussed the findings of the study and their implications, as they relate to the existing literature that concerns sexual function after cancer diagnosis.

• From the findings reported by this paper, that sexual function declines at two points: a) after breast cancer diagnosis and b) after chemotherapy, it might be that there are dual processes at work. For example, declines in sexual function
after diagnosis could be related to stress and psychosocial experiences associated with experiencing a cancer diagnosis. Declines in sexual function that occur after chemotherapy could be related to biological and physiological experiences associated with exposure to chemotherapeutic agents. Discussion concerning these issues and the relevant literature as they relate to the findings presented in this manuscript could strengthen this work and potentially add to what is known about sexual function after breast cancer. For example, in a recent paper by Pumo and colleagues (2012) it was found that psychological effects were related to sexual function. This could explain the finding that the current manuscript reports where in sexual function declines after diagnosis before exposure to chemotherapy.

Minor Concerns

- Citation needed for the FSFI page 3, last paragraph.
- To clarify the purpose of the ‘questionnaire’ (first mentioned in the fifth paragraph on page 5), it could be helpful to refer to it as the ‘demographic questionnaire’ throughout the manuscript. When describing this demographic questionnaire, it would be helpful to readers if a) questions included on the questionnaire were described with more detail, or citations were provided for the original source of the questions.
- On page 5, 6th paragraph: It is unclear from the current single sentence paragraph which ‘questionnaire’ was administered. Would be helpful to readers if it was specified that the FSFI or the demographic questionnaire were being referenced (or both?).
- Throughout this paper grammar, punctuation, sentence construction, and paragraph development needs attention to improve the paper’s ability to communicate the study’s findings. For example, one sentence does not constitute a paragraph as illustrated by the first sentence in the introduction, and the third ‘paragraph’ in the introduction (which is also a single sentence).
- In the discussion please address and describe the limitations of this study.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I have no competing interests.