

Why Dumb Down Women's Sexuality?

Vagina. There. I said it. Vagina, vagina, vagina ... If I could, I'd repeat it another 996 times, and let that be the sexual message for today.



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I don't know about you, but I'm pretty tired of hearing and reading about "va-jay-jays." The Oprah-endorsed euphemism has catapulted this cutesy expression into common parlance. It has become a catchall phrase — an informal umbrella term — for all female genital anatomy including vagina,

vulva, clitoris and who knows what else.

I just don't get the appeal. Why dumb down female sexuality? The expression "Va-jay-jay" was created by Shonda Rhimes, co-creator and executive producer of "Grey's Anatomy," to appease the standards and practices committee, because the word "vagina" had been used more than 11 times in a prior show. (They didn't seem to be troubled that "penis" was used 17 times in a single episode.) According to a Federal Communications Commission spokesman, "Context is critical in deciding whether a term is indecent." The context of the "Grey's Anatomy" episode in question is a woman giving birth. During the labor experience, she tells the intern to stop looking at her "va-jay-jay." I don't think we could find a

more "decent" or appropriate context for the word "vagina" — do you?

I can't seem to escape this made-up word. As I was flipping through magazines at the hairdresser, there it was again, screaming at me in bold red letters: "Cosmo's Ultimate Guide to Your Va-jay-jay" promising "Fascinating Facts About Your Lovely Lady Parts." I have to say that for the most part, the article was very well done. It was filled with helpful informative facts, and they mentioned the word "vagina" multiple times. But I could have done without the references to "v-zone," "southern region" and "hoo-ha."

I thought I was done with "va-jay-jays" for a while, but I was wrong. The next day my phone rang and it was a 48-year-old woman calling to say she was having problems with her (yep, you guessed it) "va-jay-jay." I was delighted she had gotten the courage to call. It didn't really matter what she called her parts, but she was pretty clueless about what was out of kilter.

"Where's the problem?" I asked as gently as I could.

"Somewhere down there," she answered timidly.

We set up an appointment. Turns out she has perfectly satisfying vaginal functioning. We traced her concerns about a change in her orgasmic intensity to a new anti-hypertensive medication. With a change in medication and a chance to talk, she's having better orgasms and feels more comfortable

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about her sexual response.

As I'm writing this, I'm chastising myself ... "Scantling, lighten up! It's just a silly funny little word that helps women (and men) feel more comfortable." So what if it sounds like baby talk? Language emerges when it is needed. It's obviously filling some void.

But there's a louder more determined "sex educator" voice that keeps protesting. "No, we can't take the easy way out. We're not going to walk into a drugstore and tell the pharmacist we have a boo-boo are we?"

As long as there is ignorance, shame and embarrassment about speaking the names of legitimate body parts, we have a problem. We can't "jolly" ourselves into feeling less anxious about grown-up subjects by resorting to childish platitudes. Language is powerful. It's your body, so you can call it what you want. There was a time when all women were "girls," and this affected our ability to be taken seriously.

So many parents work hard to teach their sons or daughters the real words

for their body parts so their children are prepared for the adult world. We worry that they are not lulled into some heinous "baby talk" game with a child molester who preys on children's trust and innocence. We tell them, "This is your penis, or these are the lips of your vulva, and this opening is your vagina — it connects to your uterus. These areas are private and belong to you."

When a 5-year-old calls her vagina "mychina" or "bagina" or when a boy calls his penis "my peeper" — it's adorable. And if you and your lover have affectionate pet names for your intimate parts, go for it. But when adults blush crimson at the thought of talking to their doctor about their vaginas, and prefer words like "va-jay-jay," I think we have to take notice. If we can't say "vagina," how will we teach our young women to clearly communicate their medical needs, birth-control questions and concerns about STDs?

If saying "vagina" makes you wince, ask yourself why. Some say the word is fearsome. They call themselves vagina-phobes. It reminds them of a hole, an absence, something dark, mysterious and wet. I suppose it's a matter of perception. Women who have experienced sexual abuse or have considerable anxiety about their genitals often feel more comfortable using words that soften the experience. Others associate the vagina with a place that offers comfort and life-giving energy as it connects with the womb.

I've always enjoyed studying languages and took Latin for many years. "Vagina" comes from the Latin word for sheath or scabbard — for the purpose of "holding" and protecting. You might not know this, but when we order our most popular flavor of ice cream, "vanilla," it comes from the Latin word "vagina" that was adopted into Spanish for "vaini" and later "vainilla" for little sheath — a sweet fragrant plant with pods resembling a sheath — inspiring such artists as Georgia O'Keeffe, Judy Chicago and Edward Westin.

For years, Eve Ensler countered the mythology and shame shrouding the vagina in her widely celebrated play "The Vagina Monologues." She painstakingly helped so many of us speak the word without cringing. I understand that our language choices for female anatomy range from overly clinical to uncomfortably vulgar. As we begin to use some of the "clinical" words with more confidence, I assure you that they'll flow with more ease.

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