



Brief Communication

## Sexuality of Older People in Long-Term Inpatient Care – A Qualitative Pilot Study

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### SUMMARY

Sexuality is an important dimension of life that should also be considered in old age and in residential care. A research project investigated sexuality in inpatient care in Germany using expert interviews and group discussions. In long-term care, there are uncertainties and a great need for a professional approach to sexuality. The different needs of residents, caregivers and relatives require special attention in everyday care. A workshop concept developed for care staff is intended to promote awareness and competence in dealing with sexuality in old age. The importance of an ethical attitude that enables sexual self-determination is emphasized.

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### 1. Introduction

Sexuality accompanies people as sexual living beings in every phase of life, and gives them sexual and gender self-realization.<sup>1</sup> Love, relationships and sexuality are related to people's health, life satisfaction and quality.<sup>1</sup> The needs for affection, intimacy, romance, desire and sexual fulfilment often persist into old age, although physical aspects may change with age.<sup>2–6</sup> Sexuality in old age is both a social and scientific taboo,<sup>5</sup> especially in health care.<sup>7</sup> Only a few studies deal with sexuality in old age and its effects.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, sexuality has a high relevance in (long-term inpatient) care.<sup>2,8,9</sup>

### 2. Background

Many recent research contributions are limited to the pure frequency of sexual intercourse or disorders in the sexual reaction cycle and their treatment.<sup>5</sup> Although the desire for sexual contact decreases with age, it still plays a role in old age. The sexual desires, thoughts, and fantasies of older men hardly differ from younger men. Some older women have a daily need for sexual contact, while others completely avoid sexual contact.<sup>1</sup> Desire and actual practice differ.<sup>1</sup> In particular, old people in long-term inpatient care face challenges in everyday life e.g. when there is a lack of privacy in shared residents' rooms. Caregivers are often not trained to respond adequately to the sexual needs of older people and adopt an open attitude towards sexuality in old age. This leads to a lack of support. Sexuality in old age is taboo, which can make older people and their families feel ashamed or guilty about sexual needs.<sup>10–12</sup> Physical limitations in old age can also hinder sexual activity and require creative solutions and support. Caregivers report excessive strains and sexual

harassment.<sup>13</sup> Since there are no studies on sexual health care in nursing for the elderly in Germany or specific training concepts for nurses, the current research project addresses this gap.

### 3. Method

In 2022/2023, expert opinions and practical professional experience on the topic of sexuality among older people in long-term inpatient care were collected in a qualitative exploratory pilot study with cross-sectional design. Expert interviews (1) and group discussions (2) were used: (1) Five nurses in inpatient long-term care served as experts for interviews (gender: m = 1, f = 4; average age: 37 years, age SD: 16.05 years). (2) The exploratory data from the expert interviews were validated in group discussions with a sample of 28 nurses from inpatient long-term care. To evaluate the data, a qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz and Rädiker<sup>14</sup> was carried out and led to 6 inductive coding categories: (1) experiences in the professional context, (2) range of sexual diversity in professional context, (3) sexually transgressive professional experiences, (4) consequences of sexually transgressive experiences, (5) professional self-efficacy expectations, and (6) attitudes towards the sexuality of residents.

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and preregistration and clarification of legal and ethical objections were carried out through the self-assessment of the Joint Ethics Committee of the Bavarian Universities. The study was pre-registered ([www.aspredicted.org, 160621](http://www.aspredicted.org, 160621)). The ethical principles of the German Society for Psychology and the Professional Association of German Psychologists were observed. The participants of qualitative group discussions and expert interviews ensure a relevant and diverse group composition. An experienced, neutral interviewer and moderator conducted the interviews and led the discussion. Research objectives were clarified at the beginning. The interviews and

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discussions were recorded and transcribed to ensure that the data was complete and accurate. Supplementary notes on non-verbal communication and group dynamics provided valuable additional information. A systematic analysis of the transcripts was carried out by coding and categorizing relevant topics. The reflexivity of the researcher was considered to identify and minimize unconscious prejudices. The results were validated by peer-review.

#### 4. Results

The result was that sexuality is an everyday issue in the professional context of long-term inpatient care. The caregivers reported that older people have sexual needs and communicate these. There was a wide range of sexual diversity, such as couples, masturbation, sex aids, "dildo", pornography consumption, videos and magazines, desire for sexual help, queer sexual orientation, homosexuality, sexually transmitted diseases. Caregivers also reported sexually aggressive and borderline sexual behaviour such as verbal or physical attacks. This also has an impact on the own professional identity and stress. Two out of four nurses point to insufficient protection against sexual violence and miss an open discussion culture about experiences with sexually aggressive behavior. Many caregivers are uncertain about the topic of sexuality in long-term inpatient care and have low self-efficacy expectations. Currently, the sexuality of residents is a rather annoying topic that causes uncertainty and is only taken up when signals are sent by residents. The topic is rarely discussed with other colleagues.

The caregivers also reported a need for training, as the topic occupies little or no place in basic and continuing education. Only a few nursing professionals feel prepared to deal with sexuality.

Based on the results of our study, 28 students developed a sexual education concept for nursing professionals. In summer 2023, experts in inpatient long-term care were invited to a 3.5-hour workshop at the Wilhelm Löhe University in cooperation with Nuremberg Nursing Practice Center ("Pflege Praxis Zentrum", PPZ).

Scientifically based concepts and educational measures such as lectures, seminars, workshops, discussions and information material were developed. The objectives of the concepts were (1) the reduction of inhibitions in dealing with sexuality in long-term inpatient care, (2) the expansion of competencies and increase of work-specific self-efficacy expectations in dealing with the topic and (3) the expansion of the use of technical assistance systems in the context of sexuality.<sup>7</sup> Topics are e.g. the analysis of the needs of residents, relatives, and nursing staff, uncertainty, information about sexuality in old age, sexual assistance, technological assistance systems, shame, stigma and discrimination, communication, self-determination and duty of care, privacy, professional dealings, safety and mental hygiene.

#### 5. Discussion

The literature search that preceded our study identified an international research gap on sexuality in long-term inpatient care.<sup>5</sup> The aim of the study was to collect expert opinions and practical professional experiences on the topic of sexuality of old people in inpatient long-term care to raise awareness.<sup>15</sup>

The results show that older people in inpatient long-term care facilities often have sexual needs and sometimes communicate these openly.<sup>4-6,11,12,16-18</sup> In addition, a spectrum of sexual diversity such as queer sexuality is also shown.<sup>9,10</sup> The nursing staff reported a need for training, since the topic of sexuality, especially in long-term inpatient care, is largely ignored in education and training.

With regard to our methodology, it can be noted critically that the sample size of the expert interviews was small and may reflect regional characteristics and subjective experiences. However, the subsequent expert discussion of the interview results by a group consensus provided some degree of validation. In addition, saturation effects were observed as many experts confirm the themes and challenges. However, the range of opinions and intersubjectivity does not allow us to generalize the statements made. Future research should therefore replicate our study with a larger sample and/or use a quantitative research design.

Sexuality is an important dimension of human life, which should also be taken into account in old age and inpatient care. However, sexuality in old age is still a taboo. The results of our project so far show that a professional approach to sexuality is essential in long-term inpatient care. The diverse needs of different stakeholders bring with them challenges that must be considered in everyday care. It's time to break the taboo and find appropriate solutions that respect people's sexual needs. This promotes dignity, physical and mental health, well-being, happiness and quality of life – also for residents of care facilities – and contributes to dignified aging.

Since the expert interviews show that sexuality is an issue in long-term inpatient care for elderly people, a workshop for specialists in long-term care was developed. Future research should evaluate the didactic concept and the benefit of the workshop, including its impact on specific self-efficacy expectations.<sup>15</sup>

The results can also be transferred to outpatient and inpatient care and offer implications for future research. The results may complement existing guidelines for caregivers, such as on protecting the sexual rights and freedoms of nursing home residents.<sup>13,19</sup>

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