



Women's Health Victoria

healthy empowered equal

***A cut below: research and advocacy on
female genital cosmetic surgery***

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Overview of the Issues Paper

- Issues Paper on women and genital cosmetic surgery released in February 2013.
- Explores female genital cosmetic surgery in Victoria and Australia.
- What is it, who is having it, what their reasons are.
- Implications for policy and potential for advocacy.



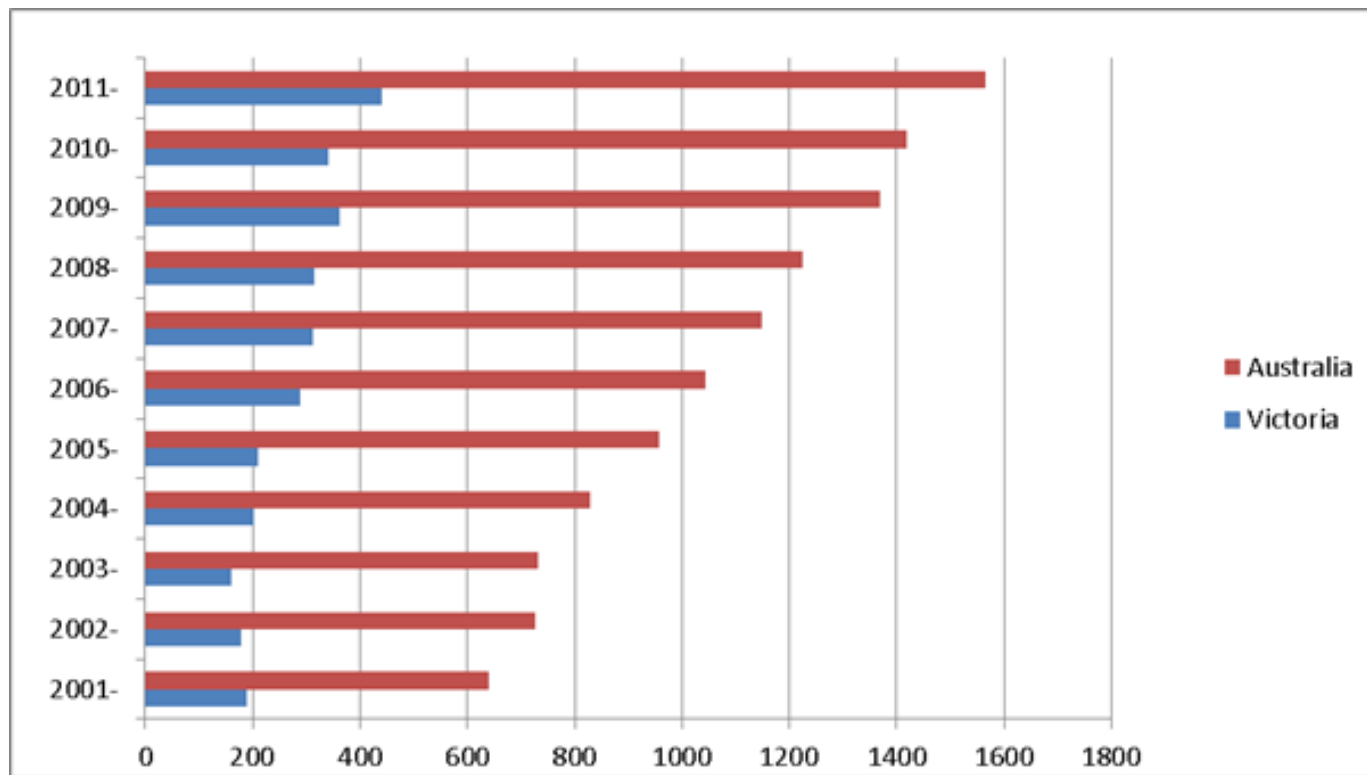
What is female genital cosmetic surgery?

- “...procedures that aim to change aesthetic (or functional) aspects of women’s genitalia but that are not medically indicated” (Braun 2010)



Prevalence

Growth in claims for Medicare item number 35533 (Jan 2001 – Dec 2011)



But...

Is this a problem?



Standard of evidence

- “Significant concerns exist in relation to the safety and efficacy of these procedures, not least because the evidence that currently exists is of questionable quality.” (Braun 2010)



Reasons for seeking surgery

- *Aesthetic*: Size , asymmetry, colour of the labia
- *Functional*: Hygiene, pain, sexual function
- *Psychological*: Embarrassment, anxiety or depression, mood disturbances.



What is normal?

- Normality and abnormality: Suggests there is an acceptable range for genital morphology.
- Classifications of hypertrophy are arbitrary, inconsistent, and promote a limited concept of normality.



Who else is influencing women's decisions?

- External influences not as prominent as we had assumed.
- Role of spouses, partners, or friends (Miklos & Moore 2008).
- Role of mothers as well as sexual partners (Deans et al. 2011).



Sociocultural context

- Lack of knowledge about female genitals, especially genital diversity
- The ideal vulva: Small, clean, discreet and tucked away
- Pre-pubescent comparison



Female genitals in the media

- Lack of visibility of normal female genitals in the media.
- Role of the *Guidelines for the Classification of Publications 2005* .



Potential responses

Advocate for changes to the media classification system.

- Remove 'genital detail' and 'genital emphasis' clause
- Or apply them more transparently



Potential responses

Raise awareness about genital diversity

- Media literacy
- Genital body image and sexuality education
- The Labia Library will be launched in late June:
www.labialibrary.org.au



Potential responses

Raise awareness among medical professionals

- Their ideas are shaped in the same social context
- They need to be aware of female genital diversity



Potential responses

Encourage safe and responsible medical practice

- Professional bodies to take an active role in speaking out and regulating provision of female genital cosmetic surgery
- The Netherlands: Protocol for management of women seeking labioplasty developed jointly between O&Gs and plastic surgeons



Now is the time to act

- Promote awareness of genital diversity and informed decision making .
- Promote access to safe and responsible medical practice.



Thank you

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