The Importance of Pleasure

It was with great pleasure that I read “The Pleasure Deficit: Revisiting the ‘Sexuality Connection’ in Reproductive Health,” by Jenny A. Higgins and Jennifer S. Hirsch [2007, 39(4): 240–247]. It has been some time since I have seen anything in print about sexual pleasure as an issue in birth control programs. The authors’ observations on the impact of different contraceptive methods on women’s sexual pleasure—and the need to recognize those impacts—was especially welcome.

Despite the long list of useful citations, the authors missed an important one. In 1977, J. Mayone Stycos wrote an excellent piece called “Desexing Birth Control.” 1 Stycos reminded us that the purpose of contraception is to permit people to enjoy the pleasures of sex without the consequence of pregnancy, and he regretted to note that while “modern advertising has spent the last half century infusing the subject of sex into areas where it has no business, family planners have been busily eradicating sex from the one place where it uniquely belongs.” 1(p. 292)

While there has been some progress in the intervening 30 years, Higgins and Hirsch’s excellent commentary reminds us that we have a very long way to go in recognizing the importance of sexual pleasure in birth control.

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As the author of the 1993 article that Jenny Higgins and Jennifer Hirsch “revisited” in their comment, I was thrilled to see that the issues are still being addressed. I was, however, less thrilled to realize that we in the population/family planning field still have a long way to go in addressing the salience of sexual pleasure (or the lack of it) in our work on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Higgins and Hirsch discuss the pleasure deficit as it relates to research and program-