Sex and intimacy in people with severe asthma: a qualitative study

Leanne Jo Holmes,1 Janelle A Yorke,2 Caroline Dutton,1 Stephen J Fowler,1,3 Dorothy Ryan4

ABSTRACT

Introduction People with severe asthma experience unpredictable daily symptoms requiring an intense treatment regimen impacting on health-related quality of life (QoL). Sexuality contributes to this, yet there is a dearth of research exploring intimacy in people with severe asthma. We aimed to explore the patient's perception of the impact of severe asthma on intimacy, establish their information needs and their perceived role of the healthcare practitioner.

Methods We have performed a qualitative study guided by Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. We interviewed patients diagnosed with severe asthma recruited from a dedicated clinic using purposive sampling. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Using thematic analysis, the data were analysed for emergent themes.

Results The nine interviews provided unique and detailed insights into their perspectives on how living with severe asthma impinges on sexual intimacy. Four superordinate themes emerged: (1) ‘Physical intimacy’: including disclosure of physical limitations of severe asthma on intimacy; (2) ‘Emotional intimacy’: the cyclical impact of the often-negative emotional struggle of living with severe asthma on relationships; (3) ‘The role of the healthcare professional’: a perceived failure of healthcare professionals (HCPs) to tackle sexual intimacy in consultations and (4) ‘Image of self’: the reported struggle to deal with negative body image and confusion regarding changing relationship roles.

Discussion This study is the first to explore the impact of severe asthma on intimacy. We suggest an emphasis on education to raise awareness and help HCPs to address this sensitive topic in this cohort and adopt positive strategies to help improve QoL.

INTRODUCTION

Severe asthma affects up to 5%–10% of the global asthma population1 and is characterised by persistent asthma symptoms that require intensive treatment, including high dose corticosteroids.1 While a strong link between poorer health-related quality of life (HRQoL) and living with severe asthma is widely acknowledged,2 its impact on sexual function and intimate relationships is rarely considered. The WHO3 asserts that irrespective of disease or disability, being able to achieve good quality sexual function and sexual quality of life (QoL) is a basic human right. Shortfalls by healthcare professionals (HCPs) in addressing issues around sexual function in people with respiratory disease are well recognised; potential explanations include ignorance, fear of causing offence, awkwardness and unease with such intimate topics.4 In addition, some HCPs may have perceptions of chronically ill patients being non-sexual, assuming that due to physical restrictions patients are unable or unwilling to participate in sexual activity.5

A recent patient survey undertaken by Asthma UK6 reported that two thirds of participants felt asthma negatively affected their sex lives; yet none of the available validated health related QoL questionnaires for asthma address intimacy or sexuality. Such questionnaires are used as key endpoints in clinical research and in evaluating treatment responses, which in turn inform decision-and policy-making.

Using a systematic approach to review and appraise the current literature pertaining to intimacy and severe asthma, an absence of empirical studies was identified; therefore, the search was amended to include intimacy and asthma. Six papers were identified that were relevant to the topic of pursuit. An identified correlation between asthma, stress and the negative impact on sexual function is reported7 while a comparison of the sexual assessments of mild female asthmatics...
and a possible risk of family distraction, due to lack of
home was rejected following lone worker risk assessment
required to attend one face-to-face interview with one of
mental health team and/or an inability to communicate
had any known psychiatric disorders under the care of
confirmed diagnosis of severe asthma and in a current
Focal and approached to take part in the study by the
Regional severe asthma clinic in the North
aims and objectives.

METHODS
Within this study, an ideographic approach to method-
odology was undertaken to augment and facilitate an
rich description of the participants’ expe-
to capture using nonomethic methods. We used Interpretive
Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative method-
which aims to capture and understand the partici-
participants’ narration of their experience of the phenomen-
and therefore was justified as the most
appropriate methodology to facilitate meeting the study
aims and objectives.

We used purposive sampling to recruit patients
attending a regional severe asthma clinic in the North
England. Potential participants were identified and
approached to take part in the study by the
asthma specialist nurses or consultant physicians whom
were briefed in the study using the inclusion/exclusion
criteria. Inclusion criteria included being >18 years with
confirmed diagnosis of severe asthma and in a current
relationship. Potential participants were excluded if they
had any known psychiatric disorders under the care of
mental health team and/or an inability to communicate or speak English effectively.

Participants who were interested in the study were provided
written study information and were requested to
contact the researcher if they wanted further informa-
to consent to participating. Participants were
required to attend one face-to-face interview with one of
the researchers (LJH).

The concept of conducting interviews within the family
home was rejected following lone worker risk assessment
and a possible risk of family distraction, due to lack of
control over the home environment. The interviews were
conducted in a quiet room within the familiar outpatient’s department and often arranged to coincide with
an existing hospital visit to reduce participant travel
burden.

IPA fundamentally serves to extract the participant’s
description of their lived experience and in depth, semi
structured interview is one of the most common methods
used to facilitate this methodology. A simple predeter-
dined semistructured interview schedule of six ques-
tions was developed in partnership with the specialist
severe asthma clinical psychologist, to aid formulation of
questions in advance (especially when considering the
sensitive nature of the interviews) and was flexibly used
to guide the interview and to guide participants if they veered away from topic of pursuit, thereby providing
structure without restriction.

The interviews ran from March to May 2016 with no
modifications to protocol based on the data collated. In
alignment with IPA, cessation of recruitment occurred
once data saturation was achieved.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed
verbatim, with data securely stored in encrypted password
protected files. Each individual transcription was veri-
fied against the original recordings to facilitate both data
immersion and assess the accuracy of the data enhancing
trustworthiness and credibility. Emerging themes were
developed by applying exploratory comments to individ-
ual participant narrative. Links and relationships
between emergent themes were then identified and
drawn together across all interviews to provide super
ordinate themes and subthemes across the total data set.

All participants provided written informed consent and
were fully informed of their ability to withdraw their participation at any time.

RESULTS
Twelve potential participants were approached, of whom
one declined and two were unable to attend within
the required timeframe. IPA methodology advocates
recruitment numbers between 5 and 10 participants.
Nine patients met the inclusion/exclusion criteria and
participated in the one-to-one in-depth interview.
Median (range) age of participants was 46 (34–59) years
and six were female. All participants had a confirmed
diagnosis of severe asthma as per ERS classification.
Entire interview time comprised of 326.38 min; median (range) time for individual interviews was 37.39 (18.31–
47.00) min.

Data are presented using the derived four super themes
emerging from analysis. Subthemes were generated by
using memorable titles, drawing on participant articula-
tion (as described in table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Derived four super themes: QoL, relationship, treatment, and emotional burden</td>
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</table>

Direct supporting participant quotations (ID number/gender/age) are found in

Table 1  Superordinate and subordinate themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate themes</th>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>Theme 2</th>
<th>Theme 3</th>
<th>Theme 4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical intimacy</td>
<td>Emotional intimacy</td>
<td>Image of self</td>
<td>Role of the Healthcare Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subthemes</td>
<td>An overwhelming exhaustion</td>
<td>Pressure to perform</td>
<td>Self-loathing</td>
<td>Previous experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The ‘third party’</td>
<td>Self preservation</td>
<td>Acceptance of self</td>
<td>A taboo topic</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Palpitations and paramedics</td>
<td>A problem shared</td>
<td>Carer vs lover</td>
<td>The ideal scenario</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Adaptation and experimentation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Practical difficulties</td>
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Theme 1
Physical intimacy (table 2) portrayed the difficulties articulated by patients regarding the ability to participate in a physical sexual relationship as consequence of severe asthma.

All participants implied an expectation that a good sexual experience necessitated ‘physical exertion’. However, even moderate effort was reported to limit sexual performance through worsening asthma symptoms: ‘There’s been times when were in full flow and I’ve had to stop because I cannot breathe’ (ID12/F/48). Limitations of asthma were also perceived to impact on the physical act of intercourse and restricted other physical aspects of sexual intimacy such as the impact of breathlessness on kissing.

An overwhelming exhaustion signified the fatigue that all patients portrayed as a consequence of living with asthma and the side effects of high-dose corticosteroids in particular. One participant described how their sleep deprivation caused marital strain as their partner felt they were trying to evade intimacy, when in fact they were simply exhausted, seeking sleep at any opportunity.

The third party
Eight participants discussed the implications of having to organise equipment such as syringe drivers or having to adapt to using inhalers or nebulisers while being intimate with their partners: ‘We sort of have to think ‘where’s my nebuliser’ before I get romantic, is everything on standby?’ (ID6/M/45). The response to this varied from patient to patient, from generalised normalisation and acceptance of it being part of everyday life to revulsion, ruining the intimacy and spontaneity of the moment: ‘well (my partner says) “we can get the machine” (nebuliser) and I think “I’m NOT having that!”’ (ID12/F/48)

Palpitations and paramedics
Five interviewees reported fear that sexual climax can induce severe bronchospasm requiring emergency medical intervention. This reduced satisfaction and

Table 2  Physical intimacy; subthemes and direct quotations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical intimacy</th>
<th>1.1 An overwhelming exhaustion</th>
<th>1.2 A third party</th>
<th>1.3 Palpitations and Paramedics</th>
<th>1.4 Adaptation and experimentation</th>
<th>1.5 Practical Difficulties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘... if I was tired I wanted to go up to bed. I’ll be thinking, ‘right I might go up to bed and get some sleep here’, you know rather than that [implying intimacy] at the time. Until people have not had some sleep it’s hard to explain how bad it is!...This was hard for me to try explaining to my partner; she thought that ... I was pushing her away. I wasn’t’ (ID1/M/34)</td>
<td>‘My Bricanyl pump’s... a big part of our relationship as well, we have to manoeuvre the pump around the actions in the bedrooms. There’s times when he has to hold the pump, so it’s like three people in the relationship’ (ID5/F/32)</td>
<td>‘Then you get to that peak where I basically feel like I’m going to die, if you know what I mean… I’m getting light headed because your body’s doing all sorts and your heart’s racing. There were some scary times to the point where [my partner said], “we’ll have to phone the ambulance”, I’ll [say] “No, are you mad? We can’t do that, when they say, “well, what happened, what have you done to her?” … But I do have panics’ (ID12/F/48)</td>
<td>‘I have now noticed that I can’t take the weight on my chest; so we’ve experimented. And all I can say is thank God for cushions and pillows, because you can sort of wedge yourself upwards and help with different positions which are comfortable for your chest basically. And it is experimentation’ (ID9/F/47)</td>
<td>‘There’s certain parts that you do like, you know, intimate things that you have to be really careful about because obviously they’re restricting your airways and you can’t breathe’ (ID13/F/59)</td>
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</table>
enjoyment due to anxiety about reaching orgasm. Additionally, the trepidation, embarrassment and taboo nature of explaining to the paramedics and healthcare professionals the reason for their exacerbation hindered relaxation and enjoyment of sexual encounters and also procured palpitations at the prospect of having to explain the rationale for exacerbation: ‘phone the ambulance? I’m like, “no, are you mad?”’ (ID12/F/48).

Adaptation and experimentation
Some participants described positive coping mechanisms of adaptation and experimentation within sexual relations in adjusting to the limitations such as using pillows as props to find sexual positions: ‘there are different positions you can’t do, there are a lot of positions that you can…we call it the “Asthma Sutra”’ (ID13/F/59). Additionally, seven interviewees noted that the emotional intimacy of being a couple is more important than the physical element. Participants described their adaptation with a positive perspective, expressing strength in adversity.

Practical difficulties
All participants echoed that the physical act of sex itself was limited by their asthma and imposed restrictions on ability to perform. All female participants spoke of difficulty in positioning, describing how differing sexual positions can constrict breathing or exacerbate breathlessness: ‘I can’t have him on top…I cannot breathe…lying flat is a no-no…you get so out of breath’ (ID5/F/32). Male participants described perceived restricted sexual performance due to the requirement for physical effort.

Theme 2
Emotional intimacy (Table 3) articulated the participants’ interpretation of the layers of intimacy ranging from physical to emotional closeness. While many negative constructs were discussed, some interviewees also echoed a positive emotional aspect of living with severe asthma. Pressure to perform resulted in feelings of frustration and guilt. Frustration with their physical self; that the mind was willing but the body was restricted. Guilt that physical intimacy has not occurred and they have not satisfied their partner. Five female participants (83%) spoke of how they acknowledged embarrassment in broaching sexual intimacy problems within the relationship: ‘that was part of the issue, I didn’t want to talk about it’ (ID9/F/47).

Self-preservation
Five female participants (83%) spoke of how they gave their partners ‘permission’ to seek sexual gratification outside the relationship, for fear of losing them completely from the relationship; ‘I actually said to my husband…I wouldn’t blame you for going, because I wouldn’t want to be with me’ (ID9/F/47). All five reported this was prompted by guilt in not being able to provide what they perceived as adequate sexual and everyday partner roles.

A problem shared
Often participants felt that problems related to their asthma were solely for them to carry ‘You just have to…try to keep a smile on your face or else you’d make other people depressed, and you know they don’t need that’ (ID10/F/46). Concern was expressed that sharing the burden confirmed that a problem existed and would only serve to impose such worries on their partners. However, it was acknowledged that putting on a façade in the long term would likely cause contention and negativity within the relationship and only when discussed would the burden ease.

Theme 3
Image of self (Table 4) tended to reflect participants’ vision of themselves and their perceived roles within their relationships while living with severe asthma.

Self-loathing
Self-loathing was evident in all participants, frequently reported as consequence of long-term corticosteroid exposure, which significantly impacted on body image. Additionally, physical limitations of asthma hindered the ability to undertake physical exercise to counteract weight gain and also impacted on even the simplest of tasks required to make oneself feel more attractive, such being able to style one’s own hair. Ultimately, such limitations all contributed to poor perception of self, negative body image and reduced feelings of sexuality. Even more practical aspects such as wearing sensual underwear were

Table 3  Emotional intimacy: subthemes and direct quotations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional intimacy</th>
<th>Subthemes and Direct Quotations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Pressure to perform</td>
<td>‘it’s like, … with the tiredness side and with the chest side, … you sort of do have to think about it a lot more and … feel under pressure yourself that you need to perform’ (ID6/M/45)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.2 Self preservation</td>
<td>‘Honestly, I’ve even said, “(male name), if you want to go out, … and find yourself someone just for… one night and just enjoy yourself I will give you the permission to”, because I feel really guilty’ (ID10/F/46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 A problem shared</td>
<td>‘Like a massive weight was lifted for me, so yeah! Because I was trying to hide things from her and make excuses about going to bed early and so on and I didn’t have to. She fully understood then, and she was by my side …and its something we’ve grown to live with together’ (ID1/M/34)</td>
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</table>
The participants voiced that ‘moving forward’ was facilitated by a combination of partner’s constant affirmation, pulling together as a couple and sheer determination to not let asthma control every component of life: ‘learning to work with the cards that you’ve been dealt’ (ID5/F/32). However, this was expressed to be a constant battle and fluctuated day to day.

Carer versus lover
Transformation of roles within the relationship was described in great difficulty by seven of the patients, who struggled to cope with their partner’s fluctuating role between carer and lover. Two participants attributed this as having a significant contribution to the breakdown of previous marriages where dyadic dysfunction occurred as consequence of the caring responsibilities overtaking the personal relationship: ‘clearly she fell out of love with me…she was my nurse…not my wife anymore’ (ID3/M/52).

Table 4  Image of self; subthemes and direct quotations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Reference</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Self loathing</td>
<td>‘I look in the mirror and I just don’t see myself anymore, you know what I mean? I just …see someone else. It just doesn’t look like me. My face and a big double chin, and all that, it depresses me’</td>
<td>ID10/F/46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Acceptance of self</td>
<td>‘I still love you’, he said, ‘because it’s the person inside, not the outside’. ‘That’s just you’, he said, ‘you are inside there, fighting to come out all the time’ …; and that’s what he’s always said about me, I’m a fighter’</td>
<td>ID9/F/47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Carer vs lover</td>
<td>‘I love him as my lover, but I struggle with him as my carer… One minute they’re wiping your bum and then the next minute you’re ripping each other’s clothes off. It does vary’</td>
<td>ID5/F/32</td>
</tr>
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To our knowledge, this is the first study to conduct a qualitative assessment of the patient’s perspective of how living with severe asthma influences sexual QoL and intimacy and the potential role of the HCP in addressing this.

Our findings substantiate the concept that fatigue in severe asthma has a significant impact on sexual QoL in patients with severe asthma, which was perceived as

Table 5  The role of the healthcare professional: subthemes and direct quotations

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Previous experience</td>
<td>‘when I had that couple of sessions with the counsellor that time I actually brought it up, and I thought the counsellor was going to run out of the room screaming!’</td>
<td>ID9/F/47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 A taboo topic</td>
<td>‘No one EVER has even asked me how this affects me never! Ever…not even my GP … I think that’s a taboo area?’</td>
<td>ID3/M/53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 The ideal scenario</td>
<td>‘Not when you’re ill, because …you just want to get out and get home, but like in a routine appointment. I think …the specialist nurses are more close to you than the GP or even the consultant, you know…they see you more regular and you’re comfortable with them’</td>
<td>ID5/F/32</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION
To our knowledge, this is the first study to conduct a qualitative assessment of the patient’s perspective of how living with severe asthma influences sexual QoL and intimacy and the potential role of the HCP in addressing this.

Our findings substantiate the concept that fatigue in severe asthma has a significant impact on sexual QoL in patients with severe asthma, which was perceived as
intensifying pressure on the relationship. A new but perhaps unsurprising observation was the fear of exacer-
ification during sexual intercourse. The participants
described this as a barrier to engaging in sexual activity
and also felt it had negative consequences for their rela-
tionship. In particular, it transpired that the fear and
embarrassment of having to call for an ambulance was
perceived as being worse than the physical asthma attack
itself. Existing literature\textsuperscript{16} recognises that, across an
undifferentiated health complaint sample, an individu-
al’s decision to call an ambulance can be hampered by
multifactorial indecisiveness involving emotions of trepi-
dation, embarrassment and the hope that symptoms will
resolve spontaneously. In a study of patients with chronic
health conditions, individual’s prior experience of emer-
gency services was a key influencing factor in phoning an
ambulance.\textsuperscript{17} It is therefore clear that the decision-making
process as to whether to call an ambulance is complex
and individualised; however, this study has clearly iden-
tified that the embarrassment of revealing sexual activity
as the cause of an exacerbation of asthma increases
patients’ reticence to call for an ambulance. In light of
recent National Registry of Asthma Deaths,\textsuperscript{18} findings
which reported 45\% of asthma deaths occurred before
patients sought assistance, mechanisms must be put in
place to ensure patients seek assistance at the earliest
point regardless of the mechanism of exacerbation.

The study identified that intimate contact from kissing,
to more complex different sexual positions could cause
dyspnoea and feelings of suffocation. Spontaneity was
often reduced, which again was described as having a
negative impact on the relationship. Premedicating prior
to exertion is often discussed in clinical consultation with
patients with asthma. This study highlights that HCPs
could consider sexual intimacy as a form of exercise for
patients with severe asthma, perhaps simply advising to
adopt usual pre-exercise precautions prior. However,
tackling the psychological impacts of sexual intimacy
difficulties may be more challenging for many HCPs.

Alongside physical limitations, a huge emotional
burden is apparent as a consequence of the disease. This
observation is widely supported by existing evidence,
identifying a correlation between low sexual function
and poor psychological state.\textsuperscript{19} Poor health and reduced
intimacy may maintain a vicious circle, with a lack of
intimacy as a consequence of ill health negatively influ-
encing desire.\textsuperscript{20,21}

Frustration was an emotion frequently voiced by partici-
pants, who had significant difficulty adapting to the
conflicting roles of being cared for and being a sexual
partner. Additionally, feelings of guilt and uselessness
were common phenomenon expressed by participants in
relation to the demands placed on partners as a con-
sequence of participants being too unwell to undertake
routine household chores or to provide sexual gratifica-
tion. A novel insight identified within this study is that
of participants encouraging their partners to seek sexual
activity outside the relationship out of feelings of guilt
and inadequacy. The rationale for this was not expanded
on and we are left to speculate whether this was deemed
to be a test of commitment, self-protection or if the
participant truly felt they were restricting their partner.

Image of self incorporates perception of body image.\textsuperscript{22}
Low self-image can threaten sexual wellbeing\textsuperscript{23} and is
associated with relationship difficulties.\textsuperscript{24} A commonly
occurring theme within this study was the impact of body
image on low self-esteem, secondary to corticosteroids
and restricted physical ability. Despite their partner’s
assurances, all participants spoke of how their pesti-
mistic image self negatively compounded on their sexual
relationship; this is supported by wider literature which
suggests that a subjective view of appearance has further
reaching psychosocial implication than any external
objective opinion.\textsuperscript{22}

Targeted treatments to help support the patient
dealing with low image of self are required, as emotional
distress exacerbates physical symptoms.\textsuperscript{25} The recur-
rence of poor self- further supports a recognised need
for increased psychology input to assess patients and
support HCPs. NHS England\textsuperscript{26} have recently recom-
ended health psychology as an essential component of
the severe asthma team. Adequate psychology support is
underfunded in an increasingly financially constrained
health economy and provision for demand remains very
limited.\textsuperscript{27} These findings suggest that we are failing to
truly capture and demonstrate the burden of psycholog-
ical ill health in asthma, yet this is an area where tangible
outcomes are crucial to maximise patient well-being.

Despite the overt presence of sexuality within society,
it remains typically taboo within the respiratory clinical
consultation.\textsuperscript{28} None of the participants during consul-
tation with a HCP had been asked whether they had
encountered any difficulties pertaining to sexuality and
all stated that while intimacy is an uncomfortable topic
to bring up, if it was broached by a HCP then it would
facilitate disclosure and discussion. They reported that if
they had received professional support or referral, they
and their partners might have been saved from diffi-
cult emotional times within their life. However, this may
appear an unrealistic expectation of the HCP within a
severe asthma service as targeted psychological interven-
tion may be required to address such issues.\textsuperscript{29}

We have identified a need for HCPs to be trained to
appropriately address sensitive issues relating to sexual
health; to facilitate an open discussion, increase aware-
ness, imbue knowledge and perhaps overcome HCPs
discomfort and embarrassment in conversing about inti-
macy with patients which has been documented in the
literature.\textsuperscript{4,5,30} Such open discussion would hope to iden-
tify patients who would benefit from further psycholog-
ical support in this area. Additionally, as observed within
this study and supported by wider literature\textsuperscript{31} that despite
the emotional challenge of discussing such as sensitive
topic patients report a positive and cathartic effect once
the issue has been raised. Regarding location for this
discussion, patients identified that private consulting
rooms in the Outpatient department as the most appropriate. They also noted a preference for discussion with nursing (rather than medical) staff in the first instance, possibly due to the more frequent exposure of this cohort to specialist nurses within the clinical setup of the severe asthma service, although it should be noted that the study interviewee was a nurse specialist. Greater patient satisfaction has been recorded with the expansion of specialist respiratory nurse roles as patients report longer consultation times, which consequently may facilitate disclosure when discussing intimate topics. Furthermore, medical staff report a lack of privacy and limited clinical time as major factors impacting on discussing complex issues such as sexual concerns. Normalisation will help to share experience and consequently reduce isolation, as isolation is compounded by a reticence to share a problem.

Limitations
While qualitative approaches facilitate an in-depth exploration of a topic, the compromise is often in sample numbers. Our study did not seek the views and opinions of HCPs involved in the care of people with severe asthma and as such, we cannot make assumptions about their opinions in regards to addressing sexual activity as part of the asthma consultation.

Only patients in a current relationship were recruited largely due to ease of defining the sexual relationship. Furthermore, the researcher was known by all participants as a lead nurse within the service and while deemed a strength of the research, juxtaposed this can be considered a limitation as it may have induced bias in the participants’ attempts to respond in a way to please the researcher.

CONCLUSION
In conclusion, we have demonstrated that there is a perceived significant impact of living with severe asthma on sexuality and sexual QoL. The symptoms and impact on QoL are heterogeneous and impact widely, meaning our approach and adaptation to addressment needs to be individualised. The research highlights that in assessing QoL in severe asthma, the HCP needs to go beyond standard clinical assessment and the currently used questionnaires, which arguably do not provide an accurate measurement of the impact of HRQL within everyday clinical practice. We propose that newly developed QoL measures for severe asthma should address sex and intimacy explicitly. With the introduction of training and discussion within teams, HCPs will hopefully be able to incorporate an assessment of patient intimacy issues in a professional and appropriate manner in an outpatient clinic setting.

Acknowledgements A special thanks to the patients involved in the study. I was honoured and humbled that you chose to share your experiences and eternally grateful for your honesty and participation.

REFERENCES