

The baby came but the sex went: Many marriages fail in the 18 months after childbirth, often because men are unsure of their postnatal role, says David Cohen

DAVID COHEN

Wednesday, 8 July 1992

'THERE were five of us, all first-time fathers, and we were having a drink one night when a rather beautiful woman walked by. I looked up from my beer and mumbled 'sex'. Then someone said, 'I remember sex.' And another said, 'I remember sex, too.'

'And then it slowly started to come out. When did you last have sex? Four months ago? Six months ago? One father hadn't done it in 16 months. It was a complete revelation to know we were all going through the same thing.'

Saul, a 33-year-old managing director from Brighton, says that since the birth of his daughter 23 months ago, his wife is no longer interested in sex. 'I lie in bed and say: 'I know what it is - you're not attracted to me any more.' She says that it's nothing personal, that she loves me, but there's no demonstration of that fact. We used to have a vigorous sex life - three to four times a week. To have the tap turned off, without warning, after 10 years together, is the most devastating, painful thing. It's caused a massive tension between us. I feel like I've been dispensed with - as if my function is finished.'

Saul's experience is not uncommon. According to Ann Herreboudt, a London postnatal counsellor, about 40 per cent of the first-time mothers she sees have no sexual relations with their husbands for up to two years. 'And if you take into account the latter stages of pregnancy, it's even longer,' she says.

'Most say their husbands are fed up, but only half the women are concerned about it. That's a big mistake. More marriages break up in the first 18 months after childbirth than at any other time. And although there are no surveys, it's safe to assume that sex, or the lack of it, is a major contributing factor.'

The problem begins before childbirth. During pregnancy, partners often experience an intense closeness. They pick out the crib, prepare the nursery and agonise over names. There arises what Christopher Clulow, chairman of the Tavistock Institute of Marital Studies, London, describes as 'the fantasy of fusion', a belief that they will go through the parenting experience together. 'The commitment of modern couples to equality between the sexes reinforces this notion by creating expectations about male participation in the early stages of parenthood.'

Come the birth, though, the parents are rapidly propelled into different orbits. The

mother becomes preoccupied with the baby while the father is expected to provide financial and emotional support for the mother. He may find that more difficult than he expected: coached in antenatal classes to be the carer during labour, he is unprepared for his postnatal role.

'The problem is compounded,' says Mr Clulow, 'because as a boy, he would have received most of his nurturing from his mother, not his father, and so unconsciously, the role of nurturer is not something his maleness prepares him for.'

Moreover, for perhaps the first time in the couple's relationship, the giving is mostly one way.

In the post-birth chaos of sleepless nights, sex for her becomes an expendable option. For him, displaced from the centre of the family, it may take on an added significance. As Michael, a first-time father who hasn't had intercourse for 10 months, explains: 'It's not just a sexual thing. It's the fact that my wife puts my daughter first, second and third and that I come a poor fourth. The child is satisfying all her needs and her disinterest in sex has become a metaphor for her disinterest in me.'

Sheer physical exhaustion apart, there are numerous reasons why the new mother may take no interest in sex: the release of prolactin while breastfeeding depresses her libido; her body has yet to return to the shape that makes her feel attractive; she associates sex with pregnancy and the last thing she wants is to fall pregnant again. And if she was stitched too tightly, penetration might also be painful.

Often, what could be a short-term problem is exacerbated because men harbour expectations that are unrealistic. Saul, for example, wanted to resume penetrative sex five weeks after the birth. Although he admits his 'preconceptions needed to be challenged', he questions the role played by society in fostering those misconceptions in the first place.

'Why didn't our parents warn us about it? If they had, we could have mentally prepared ourselves, and knowing that they came out the other side would be a great morale-booster. We're the victims of a conspiracy of silence. Even among peers, it's taboo to admit you are having sex problems. I can't tell you what a relief it is that someone is writing about this. It's rife, right across the board, and it's causing untold

misery.'

On the occasions when sex is discussed, it's often in a chauvinistic, misleading fashion, like this tasteless joke doing the rounds in north London: Expectant father to obstetrician: 'How long after the delivery, doctor, may we resume sexual intercourse?' Obstetrician: 'Most men wait at least until

after the placenta has been delivered.'

Surely the obvious time to warn couples is when they're together in antenatal classes? Ilana, an antenatal teacher with the National Childbirth Trust, says that 'sex is always mentioned as a potential problem. But couples are so fixed on the birth, it's difficult for them to see even five minutes beyond it. Later they forget that anything was said at all. Perhaps we should emphasise it more, though. I mean, if we know that couples display a selective deafness, we ought to really hammer the sex thing home.'

Even the relevant literature fails to tackle the problem. 'It reflects the way the father has been forgotten in birth-related issues,' says Yehudi Gordon, a London consultant obstetrician and author of a number of pregnancy/birth books. 'The authors treat the man as an extension of the woman's needs. He's almost never acknowledged as his own person. His frustrations get short shrift - that's why sex is rarely aired as being an issue.'

'When sex becomes a problem over a prolonged period, women need to ask themselves

why they're not making space in their lives for their partner. Sometimes the woman uses the relationship with the baby to exclude the bloke until eventually she drives him out. These are often the 'supermums', the ones on the covers of magazines who breastfeed for four years and who, on the surface, appear to be the most perfect and wonderful mothers.'

But preparations aside, how do men tackle the sex impasse once it arises as a problem in their marriage?

Saul sees two options. 'I can accept it and wait until the cycle completes itself. Or I can fight it. It's hard to do the former when your relationship was as highly sexed as ours was and so I have chosen to fight. There's also the logic of the thing. My wife complains that there's a constant stream of taking from her - by her employer, her child and her husband - and so the castle gates come up when it comes to sex. I can understand how she feels but her response is inappropriate. She should make time for her own needs by getting more child care. The money is there but she doesn't seem to have the will.'

Saul and his wife have discussed having affairs, but that is not the answer Saul wants. 'I mean, it would be marvellous just to fuck someone or be fucked. It's not a solution, though. I am still deeply attracted to my wife and I don't really want sex with anyone else. It's not a lust thing. It's a very deep sexual attraction born of years of intimacy.'

Some, like Frank, a travel agent who's had sex with his wife three times in 19 months, do opt for extra-marital sex but fail to find satisfaction. 'Whenever I do it, I feel like I've crept down to the fridge in the middle of the night and that I shouldn't be there. It's very much second best to sexual relations with my wife,' he says.

But it's not always the women who do the rejecting. Ashley, a 29-year-old economist, says his wife got really angry when he didn't want to resume sex five months after the birth. 'It was awful. My brain was feeling randy as hell but my body didn't want to know. I didn't find her attractive any more. But it wasn't just that. I saw her body as the property of our son, as a mothering machine, and I felt excluded, like I didn't have a right to partake of it.' Sometimes, adds Debra Kroll, a community midwife, 'the man is so traumatised by what he sees at the birth that he becomes impotent.'

Where can couples turn when confronted with these problems? Jane Hawksley, a sex therapist and Relate counsellor, suggests that parents seek counselling if sex remains a problem more than a year after birth.

'A significant number of couples trace their sex problems back to the postnatal period. Often, they haven't made love for a long time after birth and are having difficulty restarting their sex life. The important thing is that men be allowed to express their feelings of anger and resentment. The validation of those feelings will help to satisfy some men.'

'We also get the couple to lower their expectations, to find ways of being intimate other than intercourse. A lot of men might be happy to be hugged and massaged and then, perhaps, to masturbate. Some women are afraid that intimacy will lead to sex, so they withdraw physical affection entirely. The answer is to set short, achievable goals that lead the couple in the right direction. To rush straight into penetrative sex is a recipe for disaster. If he hasn't had it for five months, he'll come very quickly. That leaves her unsatisfied and him feeling a failure,' she says.

But aren't postnatal sex problems the magnification of faults that were there before? 'Not necessarily,' says Ms Hawksley. 'No couple is ever the same after they've had a baby. It's about the couple's ability to accommodate change, to allow their relationship to move on. Most couples don't realise that their sexual relationship is always going to be shifting, that what worked two years ago is not the answer today.'

Saul has contemplated phoning Relate, but he is sceptical that physical contact which

stops short of penetration can be a solution. 'I don't think sex is something you can half-have,' he says. He is also worried that therapy will result in acrimony and accusation. 'It's a difficult problem to admit - your sexuality is so linked to your masculinity. It's the way you express your maleness without picking up a spear or a gun in these modern times.'

What about, as one parenting manual suggests, courting her again? 'I do the washing up, I change nappies and you want me to court her] But if that is what it takes, I'll do it,' he says.

Saul is short on solutions but he is absolutely determined to see it through. 'I'm not sure about her, though. It feels like she is giving me a protracted goodbye, like she is saying 'I have what I need from you, now piss off'. In my head, I question whether that is the case. But it sits in my stomach, this feeling of total rejection and isolation and loneliness. And even though I can talk to my friends and it helps a bit, the problem doesn't go away.'

The fathers' names have been changed.