SUPER SEXT & SAFE

Getting Wise About GYN & Sexual Health



"GYN Health is important for all women. Trust me, I'm a **GYN**ie Superwoman!"

with Kath Mazzella



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Kath Mazzella OAM

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Please note:

Apart from Kath Mazzella's Story, all names have been changed to protect the identity of the women who have shared their intimate stories. All care has been taken to ensure anonymity. Any similarity to a person that you know bearing that name is incidental.

Disclaimer:

This book is not intended as professional medical advice, but rather is shared from a health consumer's perspective to help break down some of the stigmas and barriers associated with GYN and Sexual Health and to create better understanding and to promote greater awareness. We recommend that you always consult a medical practitioner if you have any questions or concerns about your GYN, sexual or mental wellbeing.

Dedication

I wish to dedicate this book to Hayley Solich and her family for the many hours of time dedicated to creating this book to share with the world;

and my husband and own family, for all of their patience with my cause.

And to all of those women who have suffered in silence... this is another opening of the door for greater awareness for both men and women.

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Kath Mazzella OAM

Awards:

Cancer Australia Jeannie Ferris Gynaecological
Cancer Award 2014
Life Member WA Sexology Society 2013
Senior of the Year WA 2012
Beyond Blue Senior of the Year 2012
Order of Australia Medal 2010
Global Womens Summit Perth 2010
Inductee Women's Hall of Fame WA 2010
Centre for Women in Leadership (short listed category) 2010
Our Bodies Ourselves US Inductee Hall of Fame 2010
1-100 City Perth Champion 2007
Zonta Intern. Area 23 Woman of Achievement 2005
Executive Womens Forum Liz Davenport Award 2005

I was told I was six years before my time because I passionately wanted to help women to speak openly about their GYN and Sexual health.

The truth is that six years is a long time to wait for women to get the message that they need to be more proactive in protecting themselves and caring for their bodies.

And it is also a long time to wait for the powers that be to realise that we need more information and education if we are going to prevent further suffering and unnecessary deaths of women through ignorance.

So this book is all about sharing stories and information, to open the conversation about women's GYN and sexual health.

In this book, I share snippets of my own personal journey - the wisdom learned the hard way - and those of some of the women I have met along the way. Their stories are revealing and every woman's experience of the same condition will be very individual. This is by no means an exhaustive list of conditions or experiences.

I encourage you to read this book with an open heart and to treat it like a supermarket where you can pick and choose the things that you want to take home.

Please share this resource with your daughters, your **mothers**, your **sisters**, your **aunts**, your **neighbours**, AND your **partners**. After all, GYN and Sexual health is not just for girls, because when she suffers so does the men in her life!

My intention in providing you with this valuable information is to create greater awareness and save lives. I hope it leaves all who read it much better prepared for the curve balls life throws daily.



GYN Woman says...

ONLY YOU KNOW YOU



KATH'S STORY

When I was 41, I discovered a lump 'down there'.

I saw two doctors and two GYN Specialists and they told me not to worry about it, but that I could have it cut out if it was annoying me.

It worried me. It hurt when I had sex, so I decided to get it cut out.

Afterwards they discovered that it was cancer and so I had to have a lot more cut out.

What I learned through this experience was that I needed to empower myself with more knowledge of my own body, not just leave it to the experts, because sometimes they can get it wrong.

GYN Woman's Tips

- Trust your intuition
- Get more than one opinion
- Know your body

Chatterbox topic is **Endometriosis**.



Ella's Endo Story:

I was nine when I started having the symptoms of Endometriosis. The doctors asked me if I was being sexually abused by my father. It was traumatic, untrue and embarrassing.

My teen years are a blur of treaments, hospital visits and pain. It feels like I didn't really have a teen life and I was so alone until I met other girls like me.

By age 22 I was in my first real relationship and the doctors were pressuring me to settle down so I could have kids. The relationship failed.

I am now 25 and I have been on every hormone replacement treatment known to man. I have found working difficult because of lack of understanding as I am often unwell. I can count the number of operations I have had on both hands.

I wouldn't wish this disease on my worst enemy but I push through it every day. I just wish people would understand that Endo is like having cancer, only you don't die.

Symptoms:

Pain Bleeding

Other Symptoms:
Bowel or bladder
symptoms, including
bleeding from bladder
or bowel
Irregular bowel habits
e.g. constipation,
diarrhoea
Increase in urinary
frequency or change
in your normal
function
Infertility

Menstrual symptoms: Tiredness Mood changes Bloating

Do you know anyone living with Endometriosis?

You can best support them by:

- Being a good listener
- Understanding that they often feel unwell and have similar pain to that of a cancer sufferer
- Doing something that will make them feel special
- Encourage them to reach out to other Endo sufferers, because there is power in the connection.

Links to Endometriosis support networks...

Endometriosis Association of Victoria (Australia) www.Endometriosis.org.au

Sydney Endometriosis www.sydneyendometriosis.com/SE/index.html

The Endometriosis Care Centre Australia www.ecca.com.au



GYN Woman

says...

CHECK YOUR LUMPS & BUMPS



KATH'S STORY

When I was worried about the lump on my vulva, like most good girls I confided in my mother.

Mum said to me that lumps and bumps anywhere in the body is not normal and she encouraged me to get it checked.

Mum was a breast cancer survivor and there was a history of cancer in the family.

Mum's advice strengthened my own intuition and I'm glad that I listened and I took action.

When they removed the lump they told me was benign, they discovered it was malignant.

GYN Woman's Tips

- Take action early
- Share knowledge with others
- Check for lumps and bumps

Chatterbox topic is **Vulva Cancer**



Viv's Vulva Cancer Story:

My family and I remember my mother sitting on a cushion for many years. We had no idea why until she passed. But there it was written in black and white, cause of death, vulva cancer.

I remember our confusion as we looked at each other and said, "What's vulva cancer? What's a vulva?"

It made me wonder exactly what my mother had gone through and we hadn't even known about her suffering.

When I saw this it made me hungry to know more about the vulva/vagina because I have daughters and granddaughters and I want them to be empowered with knowledge so they can be proactive with their health.

Symptoms:

Unusual bleeding Pain Lumps or bumps Irritations Fatigue

GYN Cancer Types:

Ovarian Uterine Vulval/Vaginal Cervical

Variations in symptoms occurs with each of the types of cancer so consult a doctor if you are concerned.

Do you know anyone living with a GYN Cancer?

You can best support them by:

- Finding out what kinds of treatments they are having and what the expected side affects may be for that treatment and then make a plan of how you can best support them through the treatment process.
- Offer to run some errands or do some cleaning for them.
- Do something that will make them feel special, like organising a massage, making them their favourite meal or treat, offering to take them on a gentle walk at the beach or a trip to the movies or theatre.
- Offer a hug. Sometimes the comfort of a hug can be a welcome relief and if they need to, just let them cry. Tears bring relief and it is scientifically proven they release toxins from the body.

Above all else, be sensitive. Ask first and allow them the dignity of a quiet refusal.

The uncertainty of living with cancer can cause significant mental anguish. It is important to be aware of this and if you are concerned, encourage them to speak to their GP or a Counsellor.

Can You Communicate Easily With Your Doctor?

Many people feel intimidated when consulting a doctor and often don't know how to communicate what is happening in their bodies.

What is your experience?

Is this you? Are you too embarrassed to say what's going on in your body?

Or is this you? Confidently speaking about what's going on in your body.



What changes when you communicate effectively?

When I don't have confidence I feel:

Ignorant Uniformed

Vulnerable

Insecure

Powerless

Passive

Useless

Dependent

Inferior

Exposed

Frustrated

Communicating allows me to:

- Be able to share my thoughts and anxieties
- Be able to question how things are
- Be assertive
- Be positive
- Be productive
- Experience delight
- Be able to solve problems
- Walk tall

Self examination is the key to early detection and could save your life.

C We need to be educated to check our V and G area and not be fobbed off by others telling us our lump or soreness is normal/thrush/STI. We are not stupid or hypochondriacs." - Sophia, Gyn Cancer Survivor



GYN Woman

says...

SHARING IS HEALING



KATH'S STORY

I vividly recall the first time I shared about my surgery publicly. I don't know quite what I was expecting. After all, it is not every day that you talk about having surgery down there to remove your clitoris, vulva and lymph nodes.

There was certainly an element of fear, not only of what others would say but about how I felt about me and who and what I was as a woman. Would they reject me...

Well, I have learned the hard way that you can't control other people, but you can control yourself.

So I decided that the big picture for women was more important than the temporary fear and the resistence I was experiencing. Two decades on I am still talking and you can't shut me up because my message is way too important!

Don't be afraid to share your story. It takes courage, but I have discovered that in the sharing is healing, for you and others.

GYN Woman's Tips

- Sharing is healing.
- Feel the fear and do it anyway.
- Experience true liberty.

Chatterbox topic is **Hysterectomies**



Alice's Hysterectomy Story:

I was told I needed a hysterectomy because of heavy bleeding and excessive pain.

I was approaching 40, married and wanting to have children, so the news was devastating.

I was not able to freeze my eggs, still not sure why I was denied.

After the surgery, they realised that the diagnosis was wrong, and they discovered my symptoms related to a different issue that was treatable.

20 years later it still affects me and I now know of many other women who have had hysterectomies and don't have a proper understanding about why it was required.

My advice to other women facing the same decision would be to get a second opinion and to also speak to your friends who may know someone who has been through what you are going through.

Symptoms:

Excessive Pain
Excessive Bleeding
Bloating
Mood Changes

Do you know anyone who has had a hysterectomy?

You can best support them by:

- Understanding how challenging it is for a woman to lose part of her reproductive system. Many report feelings of emptiness, loss, grief and the sense of not being a real woman anymore.
- Understanding that this can affect hormone levels in the body, so the person may experience early menopause or menopausal symptoms including mood swings.
- Offering to do any manual work for them, as lifting after this kind of surgery is not advised for a certain period.
- Do something that will make them feel special, like organising a massage, making them their favourite meal or treat, offering to take them on a gentle walk at the beach or a trip to the movies or theatre.
- Offer a hug. Sometimes the comfort of a hug can be a welcome relief and if they need to, just let them cry. Tears bring relief and it is scientifically proven they release toxins from the body.

Above all else, be sensitive. Ask first and allow them the dignity of a quiet refusal.



GYN Woman

says...

IT'S OKAY TO BE AFRAID



KATH'S STORY

I will never forget my first pap smear, or the one that came back with an abnormal finding.

Like every other woman, I had seen the signs on the back of the toilet doors advising women to get checked, so I did the right thing and got checked every 2 years.

I never expected for there to be anything wrong, but in my mid 30's I had an abnormal pap smear and I was really afraid. They sent me to a clinic to have laser treatment and I had no idea what to expect. It was so terrifying.

But I survived the treatment with only minor discomfort.

Of course it could have been so much worse. I could have ended up with cervical cancer, which left undetected can be life threatening. I'm so glad that even though I wasn't that comfortable with getting a pap smear I made the effort.

GYN Woman's Tips Pap smears are important To allay fears ask what to expect in a treatment

Chatterbox topic is Cervical Cancer



Helen's Cervical Cancer Story:

I was 28 when I was diagnosed with cervical cancer. I was a successful PR business owner, in the prime of my life.

I underwent life saving cancer treatments with life-long consequences.

My once vivacious personality seems long gone. In it's place is fear and anxiety. The black dog, a constant reminder of the changes.

I cannot cope with the thought that I cannot ever have children because I am going through menopause when all my friends are getting married and having kids.

Where once I was a confident public speaker, I am now living under a rock. I still have issues physically that dictate my lifestyle.

I am willing to share my story on paper but still too afraid to stand up and speak.

I urge all women to get checked regularly so that early intervention is possible.

Symptoms:

Abnormal Vaginal Bleeding - persistent bleeding between periods or after menopause More frequent periods than usual Bleeding after sexual intercourse Abnormal vaginal discharge Lower abdominal swelling or discomfort Painful urination Pain during sex Change in bowel/ bladder function Severe itchniness

Do you know anyone who has had Cervical Cancer?

You can best support them by:

- Encouraging them to connect with the Cancer Council for personal support. The Cancer Council offer group sessions, plus information about all kinds of cancers and can connect you with a support group.
- Understanding that this can be a very difficult condition for a young woman to endure, as the young person may experience early menopause and the loss of opportunity to have children.
- Offering to do any manual work for them, as lifting after this kind of surgery is not advised for a certain period.
- If they already have children, offer support with childminding, meals and housecleaning.
- Do something that will make them feel special, like organising a massage, making them their favourite meal or treat, offering to take them on a gentle walk at the beach or a trip to the movies or theatre.
- Offer a hug. Sometimes the comfort of a hug can be a welcome relief and if they need to, just let them cry. Tears bring relief and it is scientifically proven they release toxins from the body.

Above all else, be sensitive. Ask first and allow them the dignity of a quiet refusal.



GYN Woman

says...

NO SHAME NO BLAME



KATH'S STORY

When I first started to share my story, I felt like everyone was blaming me without really knowing anything about the who, what, how and why of my situation.

The truth is my cancer may have been caused by a sexually transmitted infection called Human Papiloma Virus (HPV).

I was not promiscuous, as I had only had one partner up until my marriage breakdown in my mid 30's.

No matter how the situation arises, there is no point in blaming people or causing people to feel shame. It doesn't change the situation at all and it only adds stress.

I look forward to the day that as a society we show kindness and compassion on women who are suffering, for whatever reason, with a GYN or Sexual Health condition.

GYN Woman's Tips Pap smears are important
To reduce fears ask what to
expect in a treatment

Chatterbox topic is **Prolapse Uterus**



Lou's Prolapsed Uterus Story:

I wondered what this strange pressure was between my legs. It felt like I was walking around with a tennis ball in my vulva/vagina, like my insides were falling out.

It was so uncomfortable. It felt like it did when I was carrying a baby and it was about to come out. There was this pressure down there.

I was in a lot of pain. I felt embarassed, as it looked really odd and I didn't know what to do. Eventually I went to a Gynaecologist and they told me that it was something that could easily be fixed by inserting a rubber band to put it back in place.

I remember thinking that I might have to have a hysterectomy and I sincerely was okay with that. After all, I have two healthy chidlren and don't want anymore. Fortunately, I have learned that you don't always have to have radical surgery to fix a prolapse uterus.

Symptoms:

Excessive Pain
Excessive Bleeding
Bloating
Mood Changes

Do you know anyone who has a prolapsed uterus?

You can best support them by:

- Gaining more information about what types of symptoms/pain they may be experiencing.
- Helping them to explore options, as there are many solutions to this issue and let them know it is okay to talk about and that other women have the same or similar issues, especially if they have given birth.
- Offering to do any manual work for them, as lifting.
- Do something that will make them feel special, like organising a massage, making them their favourite meal or treat, offering to take them on a gentle walk at the beach or a trip to the movies or theatre.
- Offer a hug. Sometimes the comfort of a hug can be a welcome relief and if they need to, just let them cry. Tears bring relief and it is scientifically proven they release toxins from the body.

Above all else, be sensitive. Ask first and allow them the dignity of a quiet refusal.

Emotions Experienced by Women with GYN Issues

Women with GYN or sexual health issues need support. Sometimes it can be like a rollercoaster ride, with emotional highs and lows. Here are a list of emotions and stages they may experience:

Shock - They don't want to believe it's true. They hope that it is a bad dream from which they will awake. They research for information and explanations.

Aloneness - Some conditions are rare, so they may make the woman feel alone. There may be a strong desire to find others who have experienced similar situation. A desire to find a support group may be a motivator. A strong desire for understanding.

Guilt - If related to a sexually transmitted condition, such as HPV, feelings of being dirty, loose/cheap may result.

Burdens - There may be extra bills, pressure caused by loss of job, treatments to undergo. It may feel like the whole world is against you, but this day will pass.

Re-evaluation of Beliefs - It may be a time to strengthen your religious beliefs or your belief in life itself. There may be some life altering decisions made during this time.

Fear - There are a lot of things to fear - surgery, life after surgery, the reaction of others to the changes in your body.

Do you relate to any of these feelings and emotions?

There may be a fear of never enjoying sex again or even of death.

Anxiety - Feeling anxious about surgery, doctor's appointments, the chance or recurrances, and waiting for test results is common. Any thoughts of suicide are not "normal" and should be addressed immediately.

Anger - Bouts of anger are very common, especially if it is a sexually transmitted condition.

Grief - There is a natural grief cycle through which a woman may pass. Feelings of loss are common and allowing oneself to grieve is normal.

Loss of Control - When you are used to having everything under control, the news of cancer or an STI can rock the boat. This often leads to feelings of vulnerability.

Loss of Friends - Some friends can't cope with the diagnosis and may move away. This can be very painful.

Acceptance - This is the gain side of pain - learning to accept the new state of play and to move on from the loss. Looking for the positives bring new hope for the future.



GYN Woman

says...

AM I STILL A WOMAN?



KATH'S STORY

Probably the strongest emotion that I felt when I was recovering from my surgery was grief. I spent a long time processing the mental anguish, wondering if I was still considered a woman, having lost my feminine parts.

It took time for me to see that I was not defined by my body, but rather by my own sense of who I was. The more that I found my voice, the more empowered I felt.

Self acceptance is crucial to surviving traumatic events such as mine. Loving yourself and understanding your power as a woman is really critical.

I found massage was a healing therapy during this distressed time and there was something about non-sexual touch that helped me to accept and love myself.

GYN Woman's Tips

- Allow yourself to grieve
- Massage is healing
- It's okay to feel loss

Chatterbox topic is **Menopause**



Terry's Menopause Story:

I wondered what this strange pressure was between my legs. It felt like I was walking around with a tennis ball in my vulva/vagina, like my insides were falling out.

It was so uncomfortable. It felt like it did when I was carrying a baby and it was about to come out. There was this pressure down there.

I was in a lot of pain. I felt embarassed, as it looked really odd and I didn't know what to do. Eventually I went to a Gynaecologist and they told me that it was something that could easily be fixed by inserting a rubber band to put it back in place.

I remember thinking that I might have to have a hysterectomy and I sincerely was okay with that. After all, I have two healthy chidlren and don't want anymore. Fortunately, I have learned that you don't always have to have radical surgery to fix a prolapse uterus.

Symptoms:

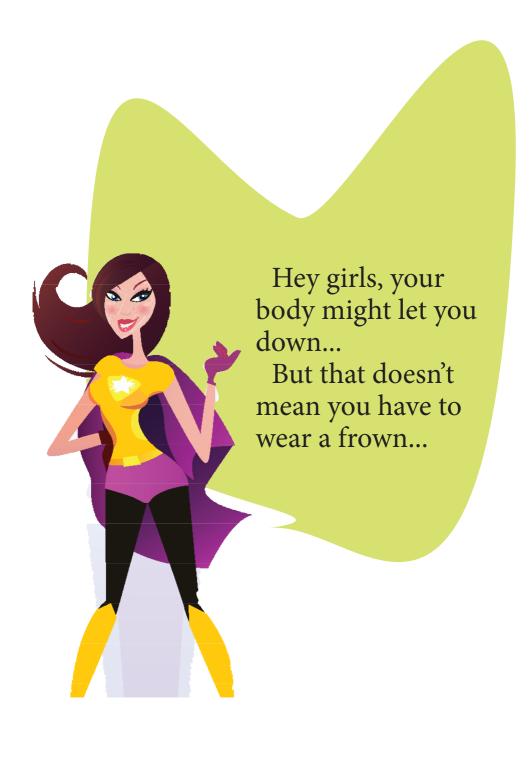
Hot Flushes
Mood Swings
Excessive Bleeding
or Irregular
periods
Insomnia or Wake
up during the
night
Forgetfulness or
unclear thinking
Anxiety

Do you know anyone who has been through or is going through menopause?

You can best support them by:

- Gaining more information about what they may be experiencing as they go through menopause.
- Helping them to explore options, as there are many solutions to hormonal imbalances and let them know it is okay to talk about their experiences and that other women have the same or similar issues.
- Understanding their mood swings and lack of control over their body temperatures, blood flow or body clock.
- Do something that will make them feel special, like organising a massage, making them their favourite meal or treat, offering to take them on a gentle walk at the beach or a trip to the movies or theatre.
- Offer a hug. Sometimes the comfort of a hug can be a welcome relief and if they need to, just let them cry. Tears bring relief and it is scientifically proven they release toxins from the body.

Above all else, be sensitive. Ask first and allow them the dignity of a quiet refusal.



GYN Woman

says...

Body's Betray But You're Okay



KATH'S STORY

While I was going through my cancer, I felt like my body had betrayed me and like it was the enemy. The sadness was indescribable, to the point that I questioned why I chose to go on? After all, what was left of me. I felt like my inner core, my soul, was desecrated, particularly in a world that didn't want to talk about these things. Why so much mystique and secrecy? It tried to silence me, but you cannot silence my spirituality.

With so much inner turmoil and a traitorous body, I had no room left in my life to consider the family and the world around me. I felt angry with the world. Why couldn't they see and understand my agony of body, mind and spirit?

Only now do I see that it was their own fear that kept them from acknowledging my pain. They were conditioned to live in that fear. My fear is now gone and I am hoping to help them dispel theirs.

GYN Woman's Tips When life hands you a lemon, make lemonade.

Accept your body's misadventures.

Chatterbox topic is **Polycystic Ovaries**



Meagan's Polycystic Ovaries Story:

As a teenager, I used to share with mum my incredible pain on a monthly basis. She would just look at me as if to say, "We all have them dear, just get on with it." Mum didn't understand until about 15 years later when she researched the effects of what 1 million Australian women endure every day when suffering with Polycystic Ovaries.

Mum now apologises for not being proactive in gaining more information sooner. Being able to connect with others let me know that I don't stand alone and I am not isolated. I wish there was a turn off switch I could flick and my body behave normally. I have often gone Dr shopping because it seemed the doctors were often in the dark re possible solutions.

I get embarrassed about the hair on my face. The excruciating pain is a silent agony because there is nowhere in my workplace that I can share my pain.

Symptoms:

Excessive hair growth on the face, chest or abdomen. Irregular or absent periods. Abnormal bleeding from the uterus. High blood pressure. Acne. Obesity, particularly centred around the middle. Thinning hair or hair loss in a classic 'male baldness' pattern. Problems getting pregnant, or infertility. Symptoms of diabetes.

Do you know anyone living with Polycystic Ovaries?

You can best support them by:

- Validate their experience by being empathetic and becoming better informed.
- Encourage them to seek medical assistance, even a second opinion.
- Do something that will make them feel special, like organising a massage, making them their favourite meal or treat, offering to take them on a gentle walk at the beach or a trip to the movies or theatre.
- Offer a hug or a listening ear. Sometimes the comfort of a hug can be a welcome relief and if they need to, just let them cry. Tears bring relief and it is scientifically proven they release toxins from the body. Talking also is a way to process stress.
- Above all else, be sensitive. Ask first and allow them the dignity of a quiet refusal.

The ongoing challenges of living with Polycystic Ovaries can cause mental anguish. It is important to be aware of this and if you are concerned, encourage them to speak to their GP or a Counsellor.

Kath Mazzella OAM GYN Forward Consultancy

Kath's life was turned upside down after radical gynaecological cancer treatment. Experiencing terrible emotional turmoil, Kath soon discovered that millions of Australian women suffered with polycystic ovaries, endometriosis, fibroids, menopause, prolapse, period pain, infertility, sexual transmitted infections, leichen scholerosis and Vulval conditions...many suffering in silence.

An intense desire to make a difference was ignited in Kath; a passion to be an agent for change for these women by breaking down the barriers and stigmas, by finding a voice and creating a more positive aspect to the way society perceives Gynaecological health

Kath Mazzella is now accessible to women, men, families, groups and corporations, via:

PRIVATE CONSULTING - Available for consultation and helps by sharing her survival strategies for navigating the Gynaecological health system; listening to you and sharing her own experiences; referring you to appropriate services, resources and provides ongoing mentoring support.

GROUP FORUMS - Facilitating educational and informative sessions and has a unique, fun approach to gynaecology and sexual health awareness.

CORPORATE PRESENTATIONS Kath is a recognised International presenter, speaking to large groups of corporate, health professionals and general public. She can help organisations fulfil their obligation to provide a supportive and understanding working environment through her informative and enjoyable sessions and workshops.



What have you got under your skirt? Have you taken a look lately? Or are you silently suffering, hoping that oneday someone will notice?



This book is all about empowering women to know what what to look for, and men and women in how to respond to women's gynaecological and sexual health challenges.

How can you best support someone with a Gynie issue? Kath Mazzella OAM, a survivor of a Gynie cancer and awarded advocate gives her best tips gleaned from over 20 years of Gynaecological and Sexual Health advocacy.

Written from a health consumer's perspective this is a quick and easy layman's guide to 'looking after your bits and your babes'.

"We all want to feel valued, loved and accepted. My goal is to help women and men be more open and supportive through better knowledge and understanding. Every woman is sexy and needs to acknowledge and preserve her womanhood."