

Executive Summary

Background

In research and practice, the sexuality and relationships of people with acquired brain injury (ABI) remains under-addressed.

The purpose of this integrative literature review is to critically appraise the dominant approaches toward the sexuality and relationships of people with ABI. In particular, we sought to identify and review existing programs focusing on sexuality and relationships which use an educational and/or peer-peer approach with people with ABI. What we refer to as 'peer-peer approaches' encompasses a broad range of peer-based educational and/or support methods, including peer education, peer support, mentoring, and other peer group interventions where the intended users of a particular program or intervention who share an identity are actively involved in the design or delivery of that program.

The area of sexuality and relationships are often neglected within the area of disability. Notions of sexual ableism often underlie these harmful portrayals of people with disabilities, which is used to justify their continuing sexual repression and denial of autonomy. In contrast, social models of disability and rights-based perspectives recognise that people with disabilities are sexual and have rights to sexuality that are enshrined in international law. These approaches offer meaningful alternatives to sexually ableist perspectives and promote the wellbeing of people with disabilities.

ABI and sexuality – research and practice

Recent literature has highlighted the need for more holistic understandings of and responses to sexuality education and support for people with ABI. In parallel, slow but significant gains can be seen in these areas for people with intellectual disabilities, where research and practice is beginning to reflect a rights-based

approach. In the area of mental health for example, peer engagement has a strong and effective track record. Within this paradigm, peer engagement approaches—including peer education, peer support, and mentoring, as well as co-production and co-design— present compelling methods of research and program development. The extent to which peer-engagement approaches have been incorporated into sexuality programs for people with ABI remains unclear.

Methodology

This integrative literature review sought to collate existing Australian and international literature related to:

- The experiences of people with ABI with regard to sexuality and relationships.
- Peer-peer approaches in sexuality programs for people with ABI.
- Inclusive research methodologies and co-design with people with ABI.
- The condition of the sexual rights of people with ABI.

Findings

Sexuality and relationships remain under addressed in research and practice, particularly in access to information and community services. A small number of programs and services providing sexuality and relationships education are available to persons with ABI, although few have been adequately reviewed. Four programs were identified that related to sexuality and relationships for people with ABI that have been adequately evaluated, all of which were positively received by participants and their families, as well as caregivers. There were no programs identified for people with ABI and sexuality and relationships that also adopted a peer-peer approach. However, we did find strong evidence for the use of peer-peer approaches in sexuality and relationships programs for other groups, such as people with

intellectual disabilities, and the capacity to move beyond existing heteronormative paradigms.

Whether or not the existing network of rehabilitation and ongoing support services is addressing the needs of the ABI community remains unclear. A number of the programs identified focus exclusively on sexual problems and the clinical implications of ABI for sexual functioning. These findings suggest that there is a need for more targeted services, and for more holistic approaches to sexuality and relationships.

Recommendations

This literature review found strong evidence for the benefit of peer-peer approaches for in a range of programs for people with ABI. We found that peer-peer approaches:

1. Result in positive experiences for participants;
2. Help to increase self-efficacy and self-confidence;
3. Are an effective means of providing support;
4. Have a positive effect on self-reported quality of life and life satisfaction by improving depressive symptoms, mood, psychological health, and promoting good coping mechanisms; and
5. Effectively increase knowledge, awareness, service engagement and levels of self-reporting.

On the basis of our analysis, we identify the need for research-informed practice in rehabilitative and ongoing support services. Specifically, there is a need for more holistic approaches to sexuality and relationships that promote the sexual rights of people with ABI. Another finding of this review was that the benefits of peer-peer approaches to sexuality and relationships for other groups—such as people with intellectual disabilities—are yet to be extended to people with ABI.