

Profile

Martha Hickey: responding to the complexity of menopause

Menopause is the focus of Martha Hickey's clinical work and research. "Not just as a hormonal event, but the meaning for individuals and society and how this affects the experience", says Hickey, Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the University of Melbourne and Consultant in Gynaecology and Head of Menopause Services at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne, VIC, Australia. She takes a feminist perspective on menopause, which includes normalising this life transition and challenging the prevalent idea that it marks a period of physical and mental decline. "Menopause challenges us to consider the role and social value of older women and the narrative that women's behaviour and physical and mental health is powerfully regulated by their hormones", says Hickey, a Topic Expert for the UK updated NICE guidelines on menopause and lead author of the *Lancet* menopause Series.

The approach of this Series is to "move beyond describing and treating symptoms to a broader model of empowering women to manage this life transition", Hickey says. The Series aims to provide the best available evidence, including symptom management and optimisation of health into later life. Speaking about the Series paper on mental health, Hickey comments: "Although it's widely believed that mental health conditions such as depression or anxiety increase over the menopause transition, we did not confirm this. Most women do not develop mental health problems at menopause, but a particular group are at risk. Knowing this can inform new approaches to prevention and support. This information may alleviate concerns of others to know that they are unlikely to develop mental health problems."

Hickey grew up in Bristol, UK, and completed a degree in psychology and a master's in clinical psychology at the University of Manchester. After working as a clinical psychologist she later qualified in medicine at the University of Bristol and specialised in obstetrics and gynaecology. Hickey trained at St Mary's Hospital and Imperial College London in the UK and at a research appointment at the University of Sydney in Australia. Completing her UK specialist training in 2001, she relocated to Australia with her young family the next year, becoming Assistant Professor at the University of Western Australia (UWA) and Consultant in Obstetrics and Gynaecology at King Edward Memorial Hospital in Perth. She was appointed Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at UWA in 2006. Hickey took up her current roles at the University of Melbourne and Royal Women's Hospital in 2010.

Among Hickey's proudest achievements is establishing, in 2003, the first multidisciplinary service for managing menopause after cancer, which has been replicated elsewhere. For the research underpinning the service, she says "we consulted with cancer patients, GPs, surgeons, and oncologists to work out what was needed. We found that people wanted

common symptoms such as hot flushes or night sweats, sexual difficulties, and sleep and mood problems managed in one place, clear communication between health-care providers about what treatments were safe and effective, and the option of drug-free treatments." Her clinical practice includes patients with BRCA1/2 pathogenic variants who are considering risk-reducing salpingo-oophorectomy (RRSO) causing surgical menopause. Recognising a gap in clinical care, Hickey led a large prospective controlled study that generated patient resources and knowledge to inform practice. In 2023, she led international clinical guidelines on care after RRSO. She is now leading the Australian sites for a surgical trial of salpingectomy versus RRSO in high-risk women. Her team also leads a Menopause Priority Setting Partnership with the non-profit James Lind Alliance to determine priority research areas for those with lived experience of menopause and their health-care providers. Jane Ussher, Professor of Women's Health Psychology at Western Sydney University's Translational Health Research Institute, describes Hickey as "tireless in her appetite for bettering the health of women" and credits Hickey's "acknowledgement of the complexity of women's experiences of menopause, which cannot be understood within an entirely medical lens".

Hickey recognises the benefits of menopausal hormone therapy (MHT), but sees a need for "greater transparency around how these products are marketed, such as the widespread use of terms such as 'bioidentical' or 'body identical', which imply that MHT is completely natural and safe". She hopes the *Lancet* Series will encourage "more discussion about the diversity of menopause experiences, less shame, and greater clarity about the risks and benefits of MHT. Like other life transitions menopause often has positive and negative aspects. Whilst it is important to hear about difficulties, persistent messaging around loss of youth, cognitive function, and sexuality does not reflect the reality for many. Older women are not just oestrogen-starved young women." To counter negative images of menopause and ageing in women, Hickey led the *Flesh after Fifty* art exhibition. She believes a "greater appreciation of the incredible contribution that older women make to our economy and communities" is needed. "Women over 50 are the fastest growing demographic group in many countries, making an essential contribution to society, families, communities, the paid and unpaid workforce. We need to support and empower women as they age and should not portray menopause as a period of decline and decay. Many women have healthy, rich, and fulfilling lives after menopause. They don't necessarily need medical care, but they do need to be listened to, respected, and supported."

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See *Perspectives* page 894

See *Series* page 947, 958, 969 and 984

For the Menopause Priority Setting Partnership see <https://obgyn.uchicago.edu/research/menopause-priority-setting-partnership>

For *Flesh after Fifty* see <https://www.fleshafterfifty.com/>