

It's not often that you walk into a doctors' surgery and feel as if you've just entered a spa. Such is the decor at a Central clinic where a Balinese teak effect, silk curtains and double-glazed sliding glass doors have replaced the sterile white walls, stainless steel finishes and fluorescent lights typical of Hong Kong medical practices.

The reasoning behind the unusual furnishings soon becomes clear: for Hong Kong, the subject matter of this clinic is still aching taboo. It's hard enough to get people to visit in the first place, without scaring them off with daunting test-tubes and stethoscopes.

Since the Hong Kong Sexual Health Centre opened for business in January, it has had a steady stream of clients. Most are expatriates, underscoring an apprehension among the majority of the population about discussing all things sexual.

Organisers of the upcoming Sex Cultural Festival are familiar with the prudish attitude towards sex that prevails in many corners. Last year, the event sought to break down taboos with its display of art, sex toys and with experts on hand to discuss sensitive issues.

However, some officials took issue with the art and attitudes – most notably the Food, Environmental Health and Hygiene Department, which demanded that a display of bras be removed from view.

Hong Kong University psychiatry professor Ng Man-lun, also chairman of the Sex Culture Society, isn't deterred. This year's event will go ahead in late May "just to remind people of the importance of sex and talking about issues other than just sexually transmitted diseases".

Attitudes are slowly changing. Sex therapy is gaining ground in private practice, and organisations such as the Family Planning Association (FPA) have recently added programmes offering sex coaching and sexual dysfunction therapy. People are also slightly less reticent about discussing their sexual problems, says Ng. "The community is more open and counsellors are more skilful. A lot will depend on the counsellor," he says.

A training course launched three years ago for sex therapists is also gradually taking effect. The Hong Kong Association of Sexuality Educators, Researchers and Therapists started offering the programme in 2004 in conjunction with the Florida Postgraduate Sex Therapy Institute.

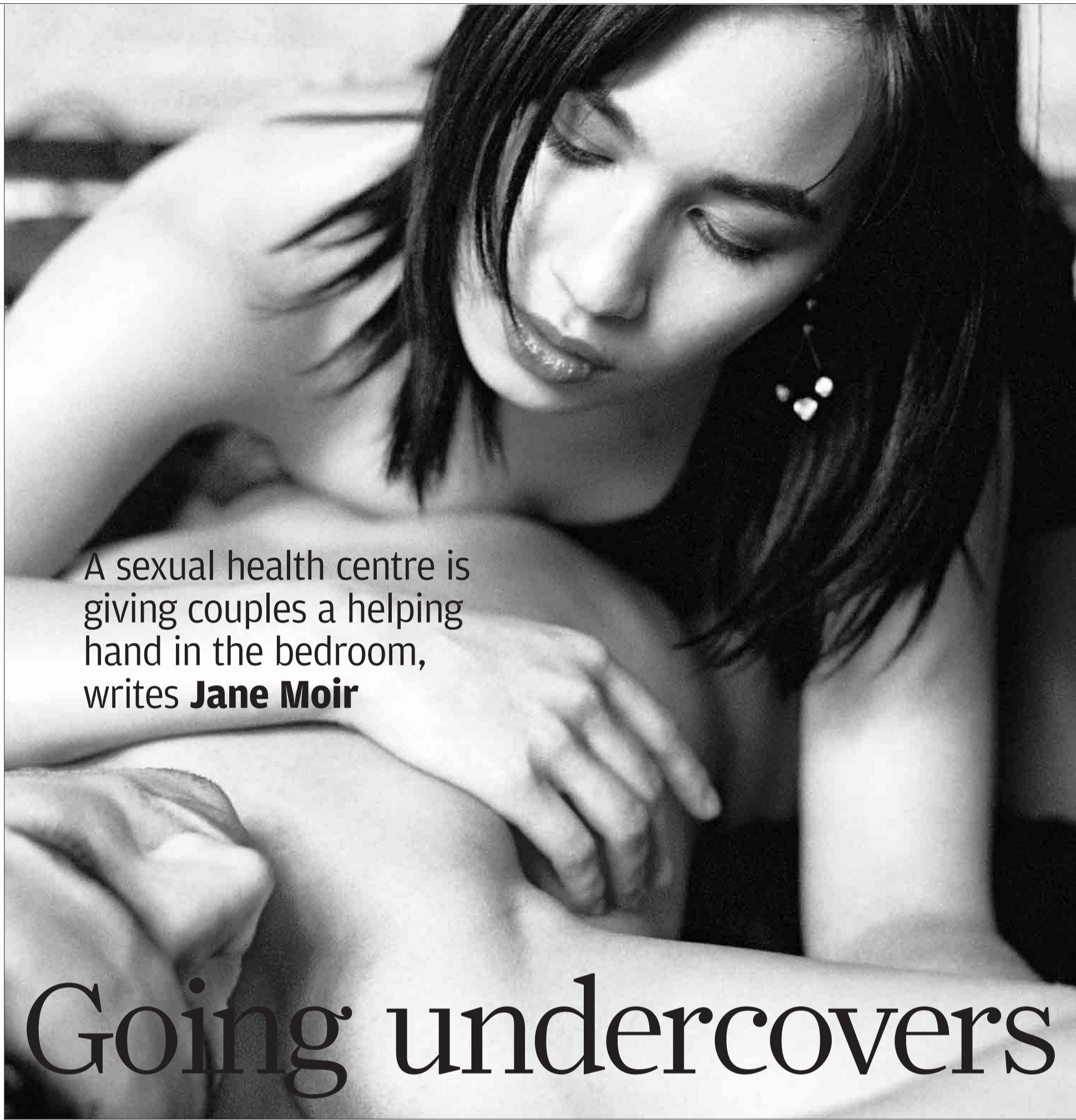


Photo: Corbis

A sexual health centre is giving couples a helping hand in the bedroom, writes **Jane Moir**

Going undercovers

This not only creates a wider pool of therapists, but has been a boost to public awareness, according to François Fong, medical director at the Hong Kong Sexual Health Centre. "We're gradually seeing clients in Hong Kong coming in with their problems," although Fong says that the city still lags countries such as Australia in terms of help for sexual-related issues.

Most of his clients attend the clinic for sexually transmitted disease (STD) tests and erectile dysfunction. The clinic also has a marriage counsellor and sex therapist on hand.

A few couples have started coming into the clinic. One in particular had been married for seven years, but hadn't yet been able to have intercourse. The husband and wife were both

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François Fong, medical director at the Hong Kong Sexual Health Centre

educated to tertiary level. Fong says this isn't uncommon in Hong Kong. Many patients come to the clinic with what seems to be a sexual dysfunction problem, but realise after a session with a therapist that there are more pervasive marital issues involved.

Although inroads are being made in terms of getting people to talk more about their sexual problems, it's against what many therapists see as a backdrop of an education system that's lagging and a lack of initiative from policy-makers to help break down taboos.

Little tangible evidence is available to pinpoint the level of sexual problems in the city, a step many doctors say is necessary in order to properly allocate resources.

There's no central database listing the number of visits to Hong

Kong practitioners for sexual problems, but a 2002 Chinese University poll found that 50 per cent of men and 53 per cent of women surveyed had difficulties with sex for three consecutive months during the previous year.

The FPA estimates that 100 couples come to the organisation annually for sexual dysfunction problems such as non-consummation, arousal disorder and relationship problems.

There's also the Durex survey, which takes the pulse of sexual appetite around the globe on an annual basis. The 2006 poll found that Hongkongers are having marginally more sex than before, but the dissatisfaction rate is relatively high. About 70 per cent say they're not satisfied with their sex lives.

Judith Mackay, author of the *Penguin Atlas of Human Sexual Behaviour, Sexuality and Sexual Practices Around the World* says she worries that such surveys give the impression that everyone is having lots of sex.

"The important message is that not everyone is having it off three times a night," she says. "The problem with these surveys is that people begin to feel dissatisfied. Even within western society, most people don't have that much sex."

Her research seems to confirm the impression that there are significant differences in attitudes towards sex between the east and west, the former being more conservative. However, she sees a slight shift in sexual awareness in Hong Kong, albeit "from very, very, very small to small".

Be better in bed

The Mayo Clinic suggests the following tips for sexual health and happiness, particularly for those seeking to improve sex as they age.

- **Expand your definition of sex** For example, touch can be a good alternative to intercourse, or try a sensual massage, masturbation or oral sex.
- **Communicate with your partner** Discuss any changes you're going through, and ask your partner about their needs.
- **Make changes to your routine** Change the time of day when you have sex or try a new position. Make time to set the stage for romance, such as an expensive dinner.
- **Manage your expectations** If you didn't have sex often in your early years, don't expect to have more as you get older.
- **Take care of yourself** A healthy diet and regular exercise not only keep your body tuned, but keep you ready for sex at any age.

Jane Moir

"Certainly there's a change," Mackay says. "It's gone from highly conservative to changing."

Education is a key issue that Fong and Ng say needs to be addressed before people feel more confident about seeking help for sexual problems. Fong, in particular, says the quality and quantity of education are lacking.

The first point of call for many people with sexual problems is their family doctor. But Fong says they're "often not comfortable talking about sexual issues and patients prefer the doctor ask them the questions first". In a busy practice, it's also difficult to get enough time with a doctor. "You need to spend a lot of time for each consultation," he says. Forty-five minutes to an hour is a good benchmark.

However, government policy is the area he says needs to be tackled urgently. This means allocating more resources and taking a serious look at sex education.

What progress is being made helping couples open up about their sexual problems isn't reflected in their areas such as advertising for clinics.

"You can't use words like 'premature ejaculation'," Fong says. Many ads for treatments wind up using confusing cartoons.

Dilemma: Wedding-dong

I'm in love with my sister's husband. I fantasise about what it would be like if we were together. We've always been close, and he's funny, charming and attentive. My sister doesn't feel the same about him and only complains about him to me, saying he's lazy and lacks ambition. I think she's the luckiest person in the world.

My mother doesn't want me to marry. She thinks my fiancé isn't the best person for me. Now, she says she'll only help pay for the wedding if we first go for couple's counselling. I think it's silly, but need her help for the wedding. What's counselling like? What will we be expected to do?

"All the good ones are already taken" must have a lot of meaning for you. That "good one" – your brother-in-law – is already taken and the reality is that he's off limits. Your infatuation with him is based more on your desire for a life partner than any real possibility of winning his love.

Sisters often compete for grades, attention and boyfriends. That behaviour usually changes after adolescence. You seem envious of your sister and her marriage. Your wish to have what your sister has and to be like your sister is competitive and sad. Are you afraid you'll never find a true love?

I'm sure your brother-in-law is as wonderful as you say, but you have too much at stake to permit your fantasies to destroy your life and your sister's marriage.

Your dream is more likely to become a nightmare. You risk embarrassing yourself, creating chaos in your family, jeopardising your relationship with your sister and parents, and losing a friendship with your brother-in-law. Keep your impulses in check.

Your energies would be better spent finding someone who can be a true soulmate of your own.

I don't know what's upsetting your mother, but she has made a good suggestion. This would be a good idea, even if she was in total agreement with your choice. Pre-marital counselling is a wonderful way to look at aspects of your relationship. It's interesting, informative and enjoyable and can improve chances for success, at a time when more than 50 per cent of marriages fall apart.

Counselling can help you understand needs and wishes separately and together. You can examine how you relate to each other and become more aware of what your strengths are as a couple. It should help you both identify whether there are non-negotiable issues and what compromises are possible.

When two people choose to share their lives, they need the skills to work through their differences so they can feel safe, cherished and respected by the other. Examining concerns with a counsellor permits a more open look at issues. Good



counsellors don't judge. They don't tell you what to do or give strict advice. Counsellors look at areas of concern and difficulties are also identified. Techniques to improve communication for stronger partnerships are encouraged.

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Signposts: Mind the gap

Michelle Gabbe

The average person uses less than 10 per cent of their brain. We've all heard such claims, but what do they mean? Typically, they refer to the relative contribution of cognitive, conscious thought to our total brain activity. Although academics haven't agreed on whether consciousness even exists, most of us equate the term with a certain level of awareness. The conscious mind looks after sensory perceptions, can recall experiences and categorical knowledge, and allows for creativity and future planning. But what is the subconscious mind, and why does it take almost all of our brainpower?

One pioneer in the integrative medicine movement, psychopharmacologist Candace Pert, has concluded that not only is there a mind-body connection, the mind and body are one and the same. Her research in the 1970s led to the discovery of endorphins and caused a revolution in the creation of disease-specific drugs. She and other researchers have found a communication network of so-called molecules of emotion that connect every biological system in the body. In plain English, the brain isn't the seat of emotions, nor of memory. And although our genetic heritage has hard-wired us to stay safe and operational (what we think of as our instincts), in every new moment the thoughts we choose to think, the experiences we attract, and the emotions that follow direct the formation of new brain matter. Just by living, you are, in a sense,

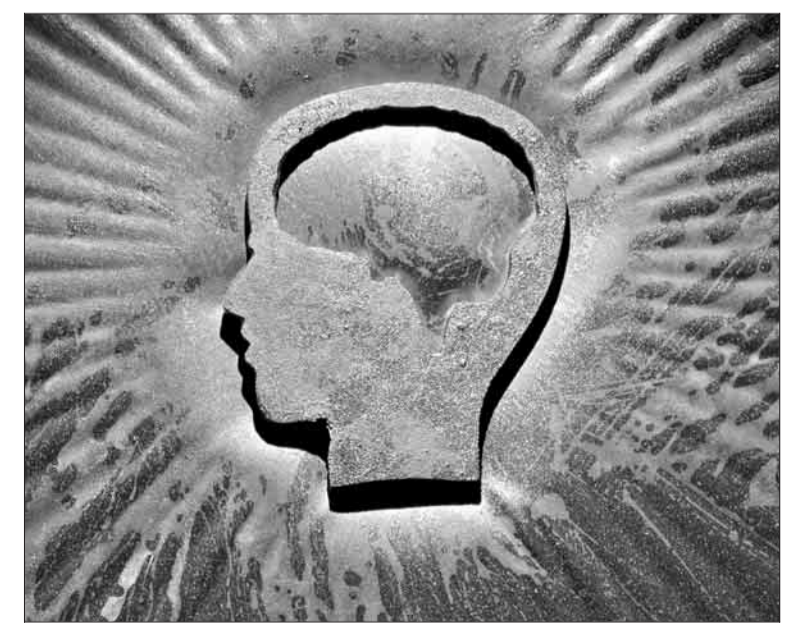
revising and updating your brain every day. And your emotional state affects your ability to learn new information and access memories. It is well-documented that people don't learn in an atmosphere of fear and it follows that other states of emotional stress can inhibit us from creating more of what we want.

How can you begin to connect with your hidden mind-body powerhouse? Just relax.

Life coach Cheryl Richardson says she tapped into her subconscious mind while writing one of her books. Like most of us tackling an overwhelming project, she found it difficult to get started on each new chapter. Rather than struggling through it with willpower, she asked her brain to have a new chapter outline ready by 3pm, and then headed to the beach for some relaxed reading. Every time a thought popped up and distracted her conscious reading with the subconscious task at hand, she would tell herself that "it's being handled" and go back to relaxation mode.

The creative flow might be slow at first, but, as with most new habits, it gets easier with practice. And if it sounds as if I'm advising you to start talking to yourself, you're right: the more intentional your conscious thoughts, the better.

Dreams aren't just a mysterious, movie-like domain outside of our control but a trustworthy information source that can give guidance on life issues and difficult situations and unlock your creativity. So take advantage



of the close virtual proximity of the conscious and subconscious minds during that floaty period before you drift off to sleep:

- Keep a journal by your bedside. Compose a friendly dialogue between you and the problem, including as much detail and musing as much feel-good emotion as you can.
- Narrow your problem to one question and write it down.
- In the morning, record as much of your dreams as you can recall, ideally before your feet hit the ground. If a dream seems nonsensical, focus on the emotions, symbolic elements or overall theme. Although much about the common

language of dreaming has been written in the form of dream decoders, dream coaches say you're the best interpreter of your own nighttime wanderings.

If you never remember dreams, make a decision to start remembering them. State out loud: "Tomorrow morning, on waking, I choose to effortlessly recall all my dreams in vivid detail." Enhance your results by getting at least seven hours of uninterrupted sleep and, if you can, eliminate the jarring effect of waking to an alarm.

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