

Pleasurable sex as a human right: an idea that has happily caught up to its constituents

By Christopher Purdy, President and CEO of DKT International.

The Monty Python film, “The Meaning of Life”, includes an opening scene where a couple talk about sex. In this [entertaining exchange](#), Mr. and Mrs. Blackitt discuss how they can use contraception during sex to avoid pregnancy, raising an eyebrow from his wife who points out that that they have two children and only had sex twice.

These days, it’s pretty rare to think that a couple’s primary reason to have sex involves only reproduction. Generating offspring is, of course, an existential and primordial reason for humans to engage in copulation. But, by far, the main reason people have sex is because it is pleasurable and increases intimacy.

It was therefore important news in reproductive health circles that a declaration by the [Guttmacher-Lancet Commission](#) in May 2018 announced a new definition of sexual and reproductive health that included pleasurable sex as a human right for the first time. While perhaps unremarkable to the millions of people already having pleasurable sex, the inclusion of this language is a revolutionary and long overdue addition to the discourse, and provides a conceptual and programmatic framework that has the potential to shift how organizations and governments talk about contraception. The Commission and those who support it should be lauded for finally catching up to their constituents. Presumably this development will be on the agenda of the reproductive health community as it gathers in Kenya this November to celebrate the [25th anniversary](#) of the International Conference on Population and Development.

But let’s please not stop here. A word-frequency analysis of the Commission’s 43-page report provides insight. “Pleasure” appears four times throughout the pages, eclipsed by words like cervical (29 times), violence (98 times), and reproductive (207 times). Why do medical concerns of sex take precedence over mentions of pleasure? And why do we talk about the distortions and dangers of sex (HIV, 73 times; risk, 57 times; cancer, 35 times) without first defining sex as a natural, pleasurable, wonderful thing? Our language gives in to our collective fear and concern that sex is somehow a bad or dangerous thing.

