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Positive attitude to menopause and improved quality of life among Igbo women in Nigeria

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Menopause is an important biologic event in a woman’s life that signals the start of the aging process. Menopausal symptoms are believed to result from ovarian failure [1], and therefore hormone replacement therapy has been considered a panacea for menopausal symptoms. However, psychosomatic symptoms may represent manifestations of suppressed negative reactions to the aging process, rather than being caused primarily by ovarian failure. This may explain the ethnic and sociocultural variations in menopausal symptomatology [2], and also suggests that attitude to aging may be an important determinant of menopausal symptomatology in any society [3]. The present study was conducted to determine the age at menopause, symptoms of menopause, the effects of menopause on quality of life, and the attitude toward menopause of Igbo women from South Eastern Nigeria. The study consisted of a hospital-based cross-sectional survey complemented by information from focus group discussions.

Menopausal women of Igbo ethnicity aged 40 years and older who had not previously had an oophorectomy qualified to be included in the hospital-based survey. A total of 209 consenting, randomly selected, eligible respondents were interviewed using semi-structured questionnaires. Data collected were demographic characteristics, age at menopause, menopausal symptoms, severity of symptoms, effect of menopause on quality of life, and attitude toward menopause.

The mean age at menopause of the participants was 48.24 ± 3.07 years (range, 40-57 years). This is similar to a previous report from the same population [4]. Age at menopause did not influence the type or severity of symptoms. Each respondent had one or more menopausal symptoms, with body/joint pain, hot flashes, and urinary symptoms the most commonly reported. The prevalence of menopausal symptoms is shown in Table 1. The majority of respondents (74.08%) described their symptoms as mild, while 16.8% described them as moderate, and 8.2% described them as severe. Hot flashes and body/joint pain were significantly associated with describing symptoms as severe (P < 0.05). Body pain and hot flashes were more common among women who had been menopausal for less than 5 years than in those who had been menopausal for 5 years or more (P < 0.05).

A minority of respondents (3%) reported feeling worse than prior to menopause, 60% felt better, and 37% felt in different. The 6 women who reported feeling worse at menopause were married but childless, while the 120 women who reported feeling better had children. Motherhood had a significant influence on Igbo women’s attitude to menopause (P < 0.001). There was no significant relationship between the severity of menopausal symptoms and attitude to menopause (P > 0.43).

Focus group discussions held with 2 groups of women in Enugu revealed that, in most Igbo communities, menopause is considered to be a status symbol because it removes the
tag of "uncleanliness" traditionally associated with men- 
strual irregularity, menopausal women are permitted to enter places 
and perform functions they were previously forbidden from. 
In general, the women reported that they looked forward to 
their menopause.

With the exception of fracture and memory loss, the most 
common menopausal symptoms reported by the 
respondents, and with no clear predominance of vasomotor 
or psychosomatic symptoms. Despite the high prevalence 
of menopausal symptoms, it seems remarkable that only 2% of 
respondents reported feeling worse than prior to meno- 
pause, while 60% reported feeling better. The high propor-
tion of mild menopausal symptoms could be responsible for 
the observed positive attitude toward menopause. However, 
it is more likely that the positive attitude to menopause modifies the perceived severity of menopausal symptoms. The enhanced social status conferred by menopause could be a contributing factor to the observed positive attitude. At- 
titude to menopause may therefore be an important deter-
minant of menopausal symptomatology, and fostering a 
positive attitude to menopause could be an effective addi-
tion to the management of menopausal symptoms.

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