

The many identities of the female breast

Claire Denness

AS I WRITE THIS EDITORIAL, I reflect on my own consultations with patients who have had concerns about their breasts. Memories surface of consultations about premature thelarche, mastitis, nipple eczema and abnormalities detected on routine mammogram. I reflect on difficult conversations about increased breast cancer risk and recall one woman's tearful disclosure of her aversion to having her breasts touched because of her experience of non-consensual contact. I have listened as people have shared with me their distress over their breasts not aligning with their gender identity. And I find myself wondering if there is another part of the female body that has such disparate but intersecting identities.

Some of us were nourished at our mothers' breasts and have, in turn, used our own to feed our children – breastfeeding as a powerful symbol of motherhood and nurturing. But, even in 2025, breastfeeding attracts public comment, debate and judgement: did it happen, for how long, and how much breast exposure is considered 'acceptable' during breastfeeding?¹

Juxtaposed with this is the female breast as a symbol of sexuality, pleasure and attractiveness, another topic subject to public discussion and scrutiny¹ – are breasts 'too big' or 'too small'? Is there enough of them on show, or too much? Public debate

over private 'property', which ultimately may enable and normalise behaviours such as non-consensual touching.

For some of us, the female breast is also a symbol of resistance, change and feminism; perhaps we have cast our bras into rubbish bins and marched against society's beauty standards and the objectification of women.²

Later in life, as society jokes about and re-evaluates women's changing bodies, breasts can become medicalised, no longer a focus of youth, fertility and desire but of disease prevention, checks and screening, underpinned by sadly familiar statistics. Many women will lose one or both breasts through cancer treatment, which can lead to complex changes in women's identities, reinforced by the societal and cultural symbolism attached to the female breast.

This issue of the *Australian Journal of General Practice (AJGP)* provides clinical support for managing premature thelarche³ and skin changes affecting the female breast.⁴ It encourages breast cancer risk assessment throughout a female patient's life, and supports general practitioners (GPs) and patients in breast cancer prevention.⁵ Additionally, it includes an update from the latest edition of the Red book on the early detection of breast cancer.⁶

As GPs, we walk alongside our patients as their bodies change. From puberty to, perhaps, motherhood and into older age, the appearance, function and health of their breasts change, and so does the meaning

attached to them. We understand these diverse but interconnected identities and are privileged to glimpse how this is woven into the fabric of each patient's life story.

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