



Original Research Article

Middle-Aged Women's View on Menopause: A Qualitative Study among Malay Ethnic Women in Malaysia

Minhat HS¹, Hamizah S²

¹Department of Community Health, ²Department of Biomedical Science,
Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400. Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

Corresponding Author: Minhat HS

Received: 20/05/2015

Revised: 10/06/2015

Accepted: 16/06/2015

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Old age is commonly link with menopause among women.

Objective: The main purpose of this study was to explore the views of middle-aged women on menopause.

Methods: Series of focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted among Malay women aged between 35 and 59 years old in several residential areas in two different states in Malaysia. Selection of respondents were conducted using the maximum variation sampling, focussing on five age categories which are between 35 to 39, 40 to 44, 45 to 49, 50 to 54 and 55 to 59 years old. Each FGD involved 5 to 7 respondents and lasted for 1 to 2 hours each.

Results: A total number of 36 middle-aged women were consented for the interviews. The interviews revealed the Malay middle-aged women tend to associate menopause with being old, especially among those of less than 50 years old. Majority of them linked menopause with end of woman's reproductive capacity or inability to give birth, lethargic or endless feeling of tiredness and insomnia, emotional instability or having more sensitive feelings and also the beginning of many health problems such as osteoarthritis which they perceived very synonyms with being old.

Conclusion: The findings of this study indirectly reflect the negative views towards menopause among the middle-aged women. Being residents in the urban areas equipped with advanced technology and health information, do not exclude them from having negative views about menopause. However, this is a qualitative study which limits generalization of findings and further studies exploring other related issues should be considered.

Keywords: Malay, Middle-aged Women, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Menopause involves a gradual process, which is reflected by the absence of menstrual period for 12 months. It indicates the ceases of ovaries functions and treatments are usually directed toward alleviating uncomfortable or distressing

symptoms such as abnormal vaginal bleeding, hot flashes, vaginal and urinary symptoms, and mood changes. Menopause is a physiological process and usually signifies the end of a woman's reproductive life. ^[1] It is a normal part of life which occurs at average age of 51 years. ^[2]

However, some women may experience menopause as early as the 30s or late, in their 60s. [3]

The perceptions towards menopause play an important role on the acceptance of women towards menopausal experience, and it varies between women. According to a study conducted among Turkish women, the different perceptions of menopause among them were influenced by many factors, including cultural differences, level of education, regular exercise, social factors, and impact of the media. [4] Stigmas about menopause probably begin early in life unless an open and proactive view is stressed by society or families. [5] Culture and societal and also media influence might play an important role in determining how individuals think about menopause.

Perception, as regard in this study, is the ability of women to have knowledge on menopause, understand the menopausal signs and symptoms, and thus cope with them. [6] Women perceptions towards menopause may differ among different female population around the world. The differences might be related to the physiological factors (e.g. age, parity and hormonal status), as well as other factors such as economic status, educational level, cultural belief, social and geographical factors. [7-9]

Literature postulated that older and postmenopausal women expressed more positive feelings about menopause compared to younger women (Adewuyi and Akinade, 2010) which indicate that women will find it to be less troubling once they have gone through it. [9] Meanwhile, a study by Avis and McKinlay found that women undergo premature menopause (surgical operation) held more negative perceptions about menopause than those going through natural menopause. [10] Chinese American women belief that menopause is a marker of aging and a natural transition, [11] while Swedish

women considered it as sense of freedom. [12]

In general, women populations shared similar perceptions towards menopause. "Freedom from monthly bleeding", or "no menstruation", is the most cited response upon menopause. [9,13] Among the other positive perceptions reported include "no more mood swings", "no more children", "no more need for birth control", [9] "no more fear of pregnancy", "a new phase of life", [14] and "time for me". [15]

However, some women, particularly rural women find inability to have children as negative aspect because fertility was highly valued. [16] In addition, they might be abandoned as the husbands may look for younger women. [17] A study by Sampsel et al. [18] reported the contradiction between American. For most of Caucasians, menopause meant aging and loss of youthfulness while African-American welcoming the transition process. In view of modern society, most of professional women are commonly more conscious about the menopausal symptoms and yet view menopause as a nuisance. [19] The present study was undertaken in several urban residential areas located in 2 different states in Malaysia, aiming to explore the perceptions of the middle-aged women who were living in the urban area towards menopause.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Series of 6 focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted among Malay middle aged women, aged between 35 and 59 years old, residing in several residential areas located in the Federal Territory Putrajaya and Selangor, Malaysia. A total number of 36 middle-aged women were consented for the interviews and selected using the maximum variation sampling, focussing on five age categories which are between 35 to 39, 40 to 44, 45 to 49, 50 to

54 and 55 to 59 years old. The selection of the respondents were selected using a representative from each residential areas identified.

Each FGD involved 5 to 7 respondents and discontinued once a saturation point is reached. Each FGD lasted 1 to 2 hours each. The discussions were conducted in a room without any interruption from others and mainly focussing on issues related to their perceptions on menopause. The content of the interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim after each interview before the next FGD is conducted. Field notes of reflexive observations were recorded by the rapporteur. Individual transcripts were analysed using standard methods of qualitative thematic analysis. The material was read through twice and later coded. The codes were further collapsed into several key themes related to perceptions towards menopause among the respondents. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Medical Research Ethics Committee, University Putra Malaysia prior to data collection. Since the interviews were conducted in Malay, a back-to-back translation was conducted by staff from the Publishing Unit, University Putra Malaysia for the purpose of publication of article.

Statistical Methods

This study is a qualitative study. Therefore, there were no statistical analyses involved.

RESULTS

The contents of the interviews revealed that younger women tend to associate menopause with being old. This perception was dominated by those aged between 35 to 45 years old. Among the reasons behind the association between menopause and aged were the end of woman's reproductive capacity or inability to give birth and the beginning of many

health problems such as osteoarthritis, heart problem and hypertension. These were among the content of the conversations,

'For me, menopause means you are old...menopause occurs between the age 50 to 60 years right? ...you know, the age when your menstruation stops and you can't get pregnant, with all kinds of diseases approaching...'

'That's old you know..... as our age increases. We ourselves can feel it, like me when my period stopped.... already menopause. The body feels different. Feeling...like we, our skin feel different too. The sense, I feel I'm already old.'

'Usually when menopause all sort of problems arise, as well as various types of diseases, knee pain, high blood pressure.... I noticed that the face will have whiteheads. Often when conversations with friends about the occurrence of whitehead, the answer would usually be... you are already old ... do not have it during younger days....'

Additionally, majority of the respondents were also associate menopause with lethargic or endless feeling of tiredness and insomnia, which are common complaints among old people. Apart from other symptoms associated with hormonal imbalance, they also reported that the frequent tiredness may also affect the sexual relationship between husband and wife.

'Menopause means you are old... arduous to sleep. Like my mother, when she got her menopause, it was difficult to sleep, became more sensitive, and gets different types of pain. It was all during her first stage of menopause.'

'When menopause...it feels old...not much energy to entertain the husband. Man even though they are old, the desire is always there, as long as they are healthy. But when women got their menopause, or reaching their menopause, they are less healthy... get tired easily, not much energy, body aches. you know... '

‘Women when reach the age of menopause...as what people say, the sexual relationship is not as good as before. But sometimes I see women even before menopause, they tend to feel tired... no mood to entertain the husband.... Old you see (while laughing)’

On top of that, the hormonal instability experienced by menopause women frequently leads to emotional instability or having more sensitive feelings, which is also frequently seen among elderly people, and is affecting the views of the respondents towards menopause.

‘Old people become sensitive easily. Feel touching and angry easily. Hormone changes I guess..... Usually physical and emotional changes are the obvious ones’

‘In my opinion based on my readings....aging involves hormone instability. Our hormone becomes lesser. Then, the face starts to wrinkle. Dry skin.... Most importantly we get tired easily. Emotion is unstable as well.... Then the body will build up heatiness inside. What is confirmed is that during menopause, the skin becomes wrinkled and saggy ... means we are old ’

One of the respondents, aged 49 years old decided to start taking supplements such as vitamins and collagen in order to overcome the aged appearances associated with menopause.

‘I often heard my friends talk about menopause... wrinkled skin, dry skin, the husband aims for another wife (while laughing)... I am 49 years old, I am unsure if I have reached the age of menopause (while laughing), but from my early 40s I have already started to take vitamins...collagen... because later when reaches menopause, various problems will arise.... (While laughing)’

On the other hand, older age categories of middle-aged women (more than 50 years old) associated menopause

with the menopausal symptoms they experienced. They were also calmer and less anxious when discussing about issues related to ageing or old age.

‘When menopause you knowbody heat starts to build up, difficulty to sleep, sometimes we feel restless unnecessarily (while laughing). People say eat the hormone pills right...but scared you see...’

‘I have my menopause for the past few years.... Body heat problem, dry skin is normal... when menopause we gain weight fast too...it’s really difficult to lose weight...although I have been trying various ways but still can’t get thinner (while laughing) and one more thing is sleep. When we hit menopause, it’s difficult to sleep soundly sometimes...’

DISCUSSION

The experience of menopause in women is unique and shaped by their social and cultural context. The cultural understanding is reflected in the way people speak or write about menopause and menopausal women. [20] Women are thus influenced by the way other people talk and think about menopause, whether in daily conversation between friends, colleges and family, or in a doctor’s consultation room, or in texts whether written or pictorial. [20] Some women barely notice the life transition while some found it as life altering. [13] The term menopause refers to the time of transition for a woman from a working reproductive system to a reproductive system that no longer functions. The findings from this qualitative study revealed that, younger women perceived menopause as a transition into another level of life, which is being old. Indirectly, they also view symptoms associated with menopause as negative experiences.

The linkage between menopause and ageing process or being old had also been

reported in other studies. According to a study by Lotte and Dorte on ways women talk about menopause among menopausal women from Denmark showed that, nearly all women used terms from the biomedical sphere like ‘a period of decline and decay’, even if they did not necessarily agree with this view. [20] In another study on knowledge and perception of menopause and climacteric symptoms among a population of women in Enugu, South East, Nigeria reported that, majority (58.3%) of the women did not regard them as a medical problem and took them as part of aging process. A similar finding was also reported from another qualitative and explorative study conducted among rural community in Limpopo Province, South Africa by Ramakuella and colleagues. [21] The community involved in that study associated cessation of menstruation to aging rather than menopause, in which once menstruation stopped, one was regarded as old. Based on the findings from that study, Ramakuella et al concluded that, menopausal issues should be emphasised and receive priority from puberty at the girls initiation schools, high schools, churches, other community resources and health care services so that when women reach menopause. They should also accept and be able to effectively cope with menopause and aging. [21]

Many women associate menopause with ageing and being old due to the effect caused by hormonal changes or lacking of estrogen. However, despite experiencing all the effect of lacking of estrogen, menopausal women may have different views. Based on interviews conducted by Heather with 45 middle-class, heterosexual, menopausal women revealed upon menopause, the menopausal women proposed they do not feel old due to access to contraceptive and birth control technology, which enable them to finalize

their reproduction long before menopause. [22] Thus, reproductive aging no longer represents a symbolic end to reproductive capacity, but rather represents an end to contraceptive use and menstruation. [22] The interviewees in that study reported enjoying sex more than ever before because they could engage in this activity without the hassles of contraception and menstruation and therefore viewed menopause as the “good old,”.

Various factors play a role in structuring women’s perceptions and experiences towards menopause. A comprehensive review that cover research on the relationship between culture and menopause by Melissa et al. showed without exception that the socio-cultural organization of the course of life in specific geographical locations profoundly affects the meanings and experience of menopause. [23] The association between menopausal experience and cultural beliefs has been frequently reported. Factors that were hypothesized to play a role in the experience of menopause (and quality of life during this period) include, culturally-influenced behaviours such as diet, smoking and exercise, cultural attitudes and expectations towards menopause which can be heavily influenced by medicalization, meanings assigned to menopause, such as whether it is recognized as natural and normal, deviant, or as an illness, previous symptomatology and prior health condition, past or current reproductive health, mother’s experience of menopause (e.g. hot flushes), attitudes toward childrearing and women’s roles, marital status, relationships with husbands/partners and their attitudes toward symptoms of menopause, social support and the extended family, social status, socio-economic status, education, career and religious beliefs. [23] However, culture, in the form of lifestyle choices (e.g. diet, reproductive behaviour, smoking) can also

modify the underlying biology of the menopausal experience. [23] Menopause is multidimensional and is influenced by biological, psychological and sociocultural factors and that the process requires responses that are equally multidimensional. [24] Attitude towards menopause may influence the experience [8] and how a woman views herself in midlife. [25]

In spite of all the perceptions, most women going through menopausal state as a part normal aging physiological process and did not seek for medical advice. [13] As for the moment, researchers estimated that by 2030, about 1.2 billion of women population worldwide will be in the state of peri or postmenopausal. [6] In Malaysia, more women are living longer than current average lifespan of 77.1 years, [26] thus indicate that Malaysian women will spend one third of their lifetime in postmenopausal state. [27] These expectation lead the physician to start seeing that menopause is no longer a negligible phenomenon yet a major public health problem. [6]

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Younger women view menopause as a transition towards old age which is characterized by the presence of medical problems, end of reproductive years, endless tiredness, emotional instability and also changing in physical appearance as a consequence of hormonal change, which indirectly reflect their negative view towards menopause and ageing. The public health care system in Malaysia should mobilize resources to improve the awareness and knowledge of women in general, as early as possible, about menopause and its symptoms in order to inculcate positive views and perceptions towards menopause and ageing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Universiti Putra Malaysia for funding all the expenses involved when conducting this study. All stated authors had significantly contributed in conducting the actual study, analysis and preparation of the manuscript.

REFERENCES

1. Ikeme ACC, Okeke TC, Akogu SPO, et al. Knowledge and perception of menopause and climacteric symptoms among a population of women in Enugu, South East, Nigeria. *Ann Med Health Sci Res.* 2013; 1(1):31-6.
2. National Institute of Aging. Menopause. [Internet]. 2013. [cited 2014 December 14]. Available from <http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/menopause>
3. Stoppler MC. Menopause. [Internet]. 2014. [cited 2014 December 20]. Available from <http://www.medicinenet.com/menopause/article.htm>
4. Uncu Y, Alper Z, Ozdemir H, et al. The perception of menopause and hormone therapy among women in Turkey. *Climacteric.* 2007; 10(1):63-71.
5. Nina F. Perceptions of Young Women Regarding Menopause. [Internet]. 2002. [cited 2014 November 7]. Available from http://www.charis.wlc.edu/publications/symposium_spring02/fecteau.pdf
6. Adewuyi TDO, Akinade EA. Perception and attitudes of Nigerian women towards menopause. *Procedia Soc. Behav. Sci.* 2010; 5:1777-82.
7. Wilbur J, Miller A, Montgomery A, et al. The influence of demographic characteristics, menopausal status, and symptoms on women's attitudes

- toward menopause. *Women Health*. 1995;23(3):19-39.
8. Sommer B, Avis N, Meyer P, et al. Attitudes toward menopause and aging across ethnic/racial groups. *Psychosom Med*. 1999; 61(6):868.
 9. Leon P, Chedraui P, Hidalgo L, et al. Perceptions and attitudes toward the menopause among middle aged women from Guayaquil, Ecuador. *Maturitas*. 2007;57(3):233-8.
 10. Avis NE, McKinlay SM. A longitudinal analysis of women's attitudes toward the menopause: results from the Massachusetts Women's Health Study. *Maturitas*. 1991;13(1):65-79.
 11. Adler SR, Fosket JR, Kagawa-Singer M, et al. Conceptualizing menopause and midlife: Chinese American and Chinese women in the US. *Maturitas*. 2000; 35(1):11-23.
 12. Bertero C. What do women think about menopause: A qualitative study of women's expectations, apprehension and knowledge about the climacteric period. *Int Nurs Rev*. 2003; 50(2):109-18.
 13. Ande AB, Omu OP, Ande OO, et al. Features and perceptions of menopausal women in Benin City, Nigeria. *Ann Afr Med*. 2011;10(4): 300-4
 14. Kowalcek I, Rotte D, Banz C, et al. Women's attitude and perceptions towards menopause in different cultures: Cross-cultural and intra-cultural comparison of pre-menopausal and post-menopausal women in Germany and in Papua New Guinea. *Maturitas*. 2005; 51(3):227-35.
 15. Villarruel AM, Harlow SD, Lopez M, et al. El cambio de vida: Conceptualization of menopause and midlife among urban Latina women. *Res Theory Nurs Pract*. 2002; 16(2):91-102.
 16. Khademi S, Cooke MS. Comparing the attitudes of urban and rural Iranian women toward menopause. *Maturitas*. 2003; 46(2):113-21.
 17. Aaron R, Muliyl J, Abraham S. Medico-social dimensions of menopause: A cross-sectional study from rural India. *Natl Med J India*. 2002; 15:14-7.
 18. Sampsel C, Harris V, Harlow S, et al. Midlife development and menopause in African American and Caucasian women. *Healthcare Women Int*. 2002; 23:351-63.
 19. Hall L, Callister LC, Berry JA, et al. Meanings of Menopause Cultural Influences on Perception and Management of Menopause. *J Holist Nurs*. 2007; 25(2):106-18.
 20. Lotte H, Dorte EG. Discourses on menopause – Part II: How do women talk about menopause?. *Health*. 2008;12(2):177–92.
 21. Ramakuela NJ, Akinsola HA, Khoza LB, et al. Perceptions of Menopause and aging in rural villages of Limpopo Province, South Africa. *AJOL*. 2014;19(1): 1-8
 22. Heather ED. Menopause Is the “Good Old” Women’s Thoughts About Reproductive Aging. *Gender Soc*. 2005; 19(3): 398-417.
 23. Melissa KM, Margaret L, Patricia K. Culture and symptom reporting at menopause. *Hum Reprod Update*. 2005; 11(5):495–512.
 24. Huffman SB, Myers JE, Tingle LR, et al. Menopause Symptoms and Attitudes of African American Women: Closing the Knowledge Gap and Expanding Opportunities for Counselor. *J Couns Dev*. 2005; 83(1):48-56.

25. Lippert L. Women at Midlife: Implications for Theories of Women's Adult Development. *J Couns Dev.* 1997; 76(1):16-22.
26. Department of Statistic Malaysia. Life expectancy at birth. [Internet]. 2014. [cited 2014 December 6]. Available from http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&id=629%3Alife-expectancy-at-birth-2014e-725-male-772-female&lang=en
27. Dhillon HK, Singh HJ, Shuib R, et al. Prevalence of menopausal symptoms in women in Kelantan, Malaysia. *Maturitas.* 2006; 54(3): 213-21.

How to cite this article: Minhat HS, Hamizah S. Middle-aged women's view on menopause: a qualitative study among Malay ethnic women in Malaysia. *Int J Health Sci Res.* 2015; 5(7):309-316.

International Journal of Health Sciences & Research (IJHSR)

Publish your work in this journal

The International Journal of Health Sciences & Research is a multidisciplinary indexed open access double-blind peer-reviewed international journal that publishes original research articles from all areas of health sciences and allied branches. This monthly journal is characterised by rapid publication of reviews, original research and case reports across all the fields of health sciences. The details of journal are available on its official website (www.ijhsr.org).

Submit your manuscript by email: editor.ijhsr@gmail.com OR editor.ijhsr@yahoo.com