

# The Pill That Revived Sex, Or at Least Talking About It

By DOUGLAS MARTIN

It is now well accepted that the diamond-shaped blue pill is a wonder of the modern age, a restorer of hope to the hopeless, the ultimate growth stock and, yes, in the blink of the CBS eye, already a tired joke at cocktail parties. But Viagra is now ascending to a yet loftier status, that of Topic One for America's would-be intellectuals, as seemingly everyone from subway to salon waxes ponderous or salacious or both in the rush to instant analysis.

Bob Guccione, the publisher of Penthouse, proclaimed that Viagra will "lead to new relationships between men and women and undercut the feminist agenda." He said it will "free the American male libido in the same way the Pill did."

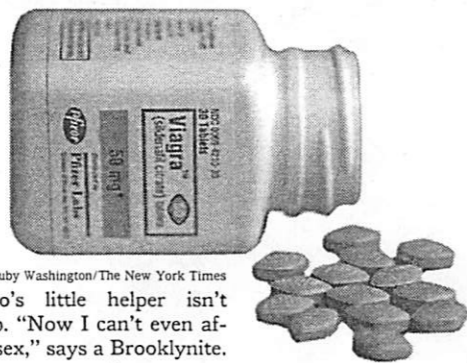
Wow. But that's not Erica Jong's take. In a very long article in the weekly New York Observer, she used words you will not read in this newspaper to suggest that it might be about time for men to start satisfying women in the bedroom, given the way so many of them strut about. But a pill? "We've been promised pills to change the world before, and the world has other ideas," she wrote.

## In the Beginning

Like it or not, Viagra seems inescapable. At the Fifty Plus Expo at Madison Square Garden last week, a psychiatrist lecturing about sexuality was asked about nothing but Viagra, until someone brought up a new topic. Do such aphrodisiacs as rhinoceros horns and ground-up tiger penises work?

Not for tigers, the doctor replied. But he purred about Viagra, the Pfizer pill being prescribed at a 40,000-a-day rate. Viagra is a story that has already developed second chapters. A Milwaukee clinic made just as much news last week in stopping sales of the drug on the Internet as it did the week before in peddling it.

Impotence, of course, is a problem dating back to Genesis, when Abimelech was stricken with it for just thinking about having sex with Abraham's wife. The



Ruby Washington/The New York Times  
Libido's little helper isn't cheap. "Now I can't even afford sex," says a Brooklynite.

ancient Greeks and Egyptians had folk remedies to deal with it. Homer and Shakespeare both mentioned the flowering plant Jimsonweed as a possible antidote. And, in recent years, urologists have often recalled the dramatic moment at a 1983 meeting of the American Urological Association in Las Vegas when a British physician, Giles Brindley, dropped his trousers to reveal the dramatic maximizing effect of an injection he had given himself.

But Viagra is something very different, much easier to use than previous generations of suppositories, injections and vacuum pumps. It might be more than that: there is this giant hope across the land that sex itself may qualitatively change for the better — though at \$10 a pop, with scant hope of insurance company reimbursement, it may not be for everyone. "And now I can't even afford sex," a Brooklyn subway passenger grumbled the other day. At the least, Viagra marks another step toward open discussion of taboo subjects.

"I think it's a revolution," said an 82-year-old retired garment worker, who feels he now may be able to keep up with his 87-year-old wife. His functioning had been impaired by prostate surgery. "The women should be very

## Sexual impotence is a problem so widespread that more and more men seem to be coming down with it now that there's a cure.

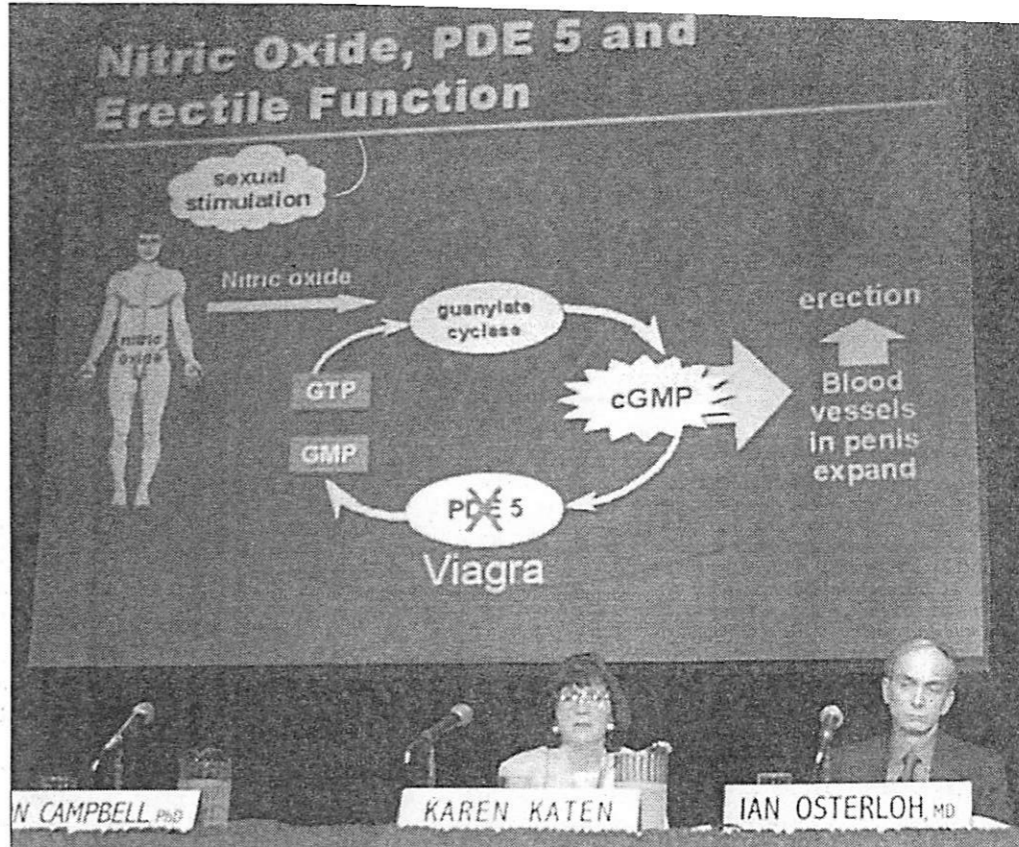
happy with it, because now men can be much more sexually active for a longer period of time."

Most estimates are that at least 30 million men suffer from impotence, but the numbers are higher if you define the problem more broadly. In 1994, the Massachusetts Male Aging Study asked questions about the specifics of men's erections, and reached the conclusion that half the male population between the ages of 40 and 70 had at least mild "erectile dysfunction," meaning occasional impotence. But urologists question how much of this is "erectile dysphoria," meaning a vague sense of dissatisfaction. A new vocabulary is emerging.

But there is also a blurring of the line between real need and sexual enhancement. Reached at his Manhattan office, Dr. Steven Lamm took time away from examining a 52-year-old man who wanted Viagra as "insurance" in his relationship with a 24-year-old woman. His goal was repeated orgasms, though he also inquired about a drug to deal with his baldness.

"The man is right in front of me," Dr. Lamm said. "I can't make these things up."

But the internist is certainly quick to leap on a trend. He participated in clinical trials of another impotence pill



Arrows to virility: Pfizer announcing Federal approval of Viagra in March.

about to hit the market, Zonagen's Vasomax, and combined that experience with the Viagra research to write a book called "The Virility Solution." Published by Simon & Schuster, it has this Tuesday as its official publication date.

Viagra, he contends, is tapping a new market. "The vast majority of men who have asked about the drug have never gone to the doctor and asked about their dysfunction," he said. "What you're seeing is a monumental landmark in the field of sexual medicine. This is not repair work anymore. I'm a coach now."

## Sexuality Lost and Found

Some contend that Viagra is important because it gives many men back a part of themselves, a part they had lost and deeply mourned. Dr. J. Francois Eid, a urologist and director of the Sexual Function Center at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, said his experience in the Viagra trials led him to think of penile dysfunction in the sense of a body deformity. It is like losing a foot, but with only you knowing it, he says. And the psychological effects multiply: Men stop hugging their wives. "I didn't want to stir things up," one told him. Wives are afraid to kiss their husbands. Men become irritable with their children.

"The moment I lost my erection, I just couldn't take it anymore," a patient said. "Every time there's a joke about sex, my head sinks into my shoulder. It's almost like having cancer."

Now, for people who deal professionally with sex issues, there is an almost palpable sigh of relief. "It's a major miracle and I'm so happy for my patients," said Karen Martin, a sex therapist at the Sexuality Center at North Shore-L.I.J. Health Systems in Lake Success, N.Y. "So many people experience sexual difficulties."

But she said she is worried that people will be disappointed if they think a pill will solve everything. "If you hate your partner, or find her repulsive, or if she is psychologically hard on you, it won't help at all," she said. "This is not going to make years of emotional damage disappear."

She further suggested that Viagra could have the effect of focusing sexual experience too narrowly, something she says already limits many couples. "In this culture we see being sexual as having intercourse," she said. "We're a very meat-and-potatoes culture. In other cultures, they toss in a few mushrooms."

Mainly, Ms. Martin suggests that men must try harder, pill or no pill. "Too many men are lazy lovers," she said. "It's like they'd rather play golf, watch television or go to sleep."

Raoul Felder, the divorce lawyer, says Viagra is the talk of his office. One woman said she hasn't had sex with her husband for 35 years, and now hopes she can. But Mr. Felder takes the more cynical view, not uncommon in his business, that the drug will be most utilized with mistresses and girl friends. He claims to worry about this. "Some of these old guys will drop dead from it," he said. "They'll collapse."