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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

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“IT’S A NATURAL PROCESS AND WE SHOULD ACCEPT IT AS OUR DESTINY”: INDONESIAN WOMEN PERCEPTION TO MENOPAUSE

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ABSTRACT

Background: The changes in menstrual cycle are commonly followed by symptoms such as hot flushes, palpitations, sleep disorders, depression, irritability, headaches and low sexual drive in women. Women’s knowledge and perception to their menopause cyclic changes are important in their adaptation to menopause symptoms.

Objective: This study aims to assess women’s perception toward menopause.

Methods: This study employed a qualitative research design with phenomenology approach. Nine married women aged 45-55, residing in Ngestiharjo, Bantul district, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta, Indonesia participated in this research.

Results: Respondents perceived menopause as a natural event for every woman above 45 years old and therefore it should be accepted as it is. Participants of the study defining menopause as a period when ovaries naturally end producing sexual hormone resulting with no menstrual periods for 12 consecutive months without other identified biological or physiological causes. The participants understand the basic knowledge of menopause and remarked their menopause period with muscular pain and irregular flows. In practice, as well as other menopausal women, respondents also experienced vaginal pains during coitus.

Conclusion: Women of the study acknowledged that menopause as the end of their reproductive period. It is believed as a natural event and will be experienced by every woman. Nevertheless, women’s misconception and belief to menopause myths alarms the need for an adequate information related healthy menopause. Women preparedness is expected to reduce the symptoms and disorders following menopause.

Key words: menopause, perception, knowledge

INTRODUCTION

National Statistic Office of Indonesia estimated the number of women aged 40-59 hits 21,567,413 in 2015, or about one fourth of the population. As well as other developing countries, the female population aged 50 is projected to rise as life expectancy at birth is increasing.¹ This group of population indeed required special attention since at the age of 45-55, most women underwent natural menopause when menstrual periods ceased and hormone productions decline. With lowered level of reproductive hormone, the likelihood of physical and physiological disorders is elevated.²

The changes in menstrual cycle are commonly followed by some symptoms such as hot flushes, palpitations, sleep disorders, depression, irritability, headaches and low sexual drive in women.³ Postmenopausal women are also likely to experience dyspareunia, vaginismus and genital atrophy.⁴ About 37.9% of females admitted depression at their menstrual transition, and the manifestation increased 3.7 times if estrogen level found decreased.⁵ Those experiences drive women to have less sexual activity and unfortunately, it affects their partners. Men with infertile partners have been reported having less intercourse satisfaction and relationship problems.^{6,7}

Women's knowledge and perception to their menopause cyclic changes are important in their adjustment to menopause symptoms. The recent study found that the acceptance of menopause as a natural process in Asia are often left women without treatment or only obtain herbal or natural remedies.⁸ Although Indonesia's government has provided a support group for postmenopausal women in every health center, yet, menopause has not been discussed adequately. Therefore, this study aims to assess women's perception toward menopause. Ngestiharjo village, Bantul district,

bordered with Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta was chosen as the study site.

METHODS

The present study employed a qualitative research design with phenomenology approach. Nine married women aged 45-55, residing in Ngestiharjo, Bantul district, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta, Indonesia were participated in this research. Ngestiharjo village was chosen as study site considering its proximity to city center, which assumed to enable the women in the area to have better information and facilities related to menopause. The first informant was selected by choosing one village health volunteer who has entered menopausal period. The information of the next respondents was obtained from the first informant by snowball sampling technique and considering these following inclusion criteria: 1) pre-menopause women who experienced irregular menstruation for 1 or two years; and 2) sexually active married women. Semi structured interview in local language was administered for data collection.

Time triangulation was performed to ensure the reliability of the data by re-interviewing the same respondents at different period. Descriptive qualitative analysis was performed after transcription and translation from local language to English. Written informed consent was obtained before interview taken place. The study has already approved by the ethical committee of Universitas Aisyiyah Yogyakarta dated December 29th, 2015, with Number: 11/KEP-SAY/XII/2015.

RESULTS

Characteristics of respondents

Three of nine participants were premenopausal women, whereas the others were undergoing their menopausal period. Five of the married women participated in this study were

unemployed, while the rest were self-employed. The level of education attained by respondents relatively varied, from never completed primary to higher education. These characteristics should be taken into consideration because women's perception is closely related to their educational background.

Defining menopause and its cause

Participants of the study defining menopause as a period when ovaries naturally end producing sexual hormone resulting with no menstrual periods for 12 consecutive months without other identified biological or physiological causes, or in the other hand, known as the end of her reproduction cycle.

Menstruation paused due to contraceptive discontinuation is not regarded as menopause. Participants' knowledge of menopause was culturally formed from their social environment. It was inherited from mothers to daughters, coupled with women's socialization and also media exposure. In terms of the onset of menopause, this study found a varying age, started from 45 to 55 years old. Respondent 7 (P7, 47 years) and Respondent 8 (P8, 49 years) acknowledged their menopausal period after experiencing irregular flow due to lower hormone production.

Menopausal symptoms: Muscular pain, heavy flow at last menstruation, and hypertension

The participants understand the basic knowledge of menopause and remarked their menopause period with muscular pain and irregular flows. Begin with irregular periods; respondents also undergo heavy flow menstruation at the last menstruation. Sometimes it also accompanied by severe hypertension although some of them reported no symptoms experienced during the premenopause.

"I experienced irregular flow of menstruation. Sometimes twice a month, sometimes it stopped for two to four months. The last one was extremely heavy flow" (P1, 45 years).

Although no respondents admitted any physical changes during the premenopause, vasomotor disruption was reported. Respondents encountered hot flush and hypertension although it was not accompanied by night sweat, dryness vaginal and drypareunia, irritable, memory loss and metabolic problems, insomnia, depression, fatigue, low sex drive, irregular periods, and urinary incontinence as many women experienced. No participants reported any physiological changes during their menopausal period.

Sexual activity

Menopause women expressed their most common sexual complaints such as declined in sexual desire, vaginal dryness and dyspareunia, poor arousal and orgasm and impaired sexual satisfaction.² The vaginal dryness at menopausal period as a result of the lower production of estrogen and progesterone^{2,9} causes inconvenience during sexual intercourse and lower the sexual intention due to lack of vaginal fluid.¹⁰ As well as other menopausal women, Respondent 4 (P4, 50 years) and Respondent 9 (P9, 51 years) also experienced vaginal pains during coitus; however, they keep engage in sexual intercourse to satisfy her husband and maintain their sexual relation. Of respondents who reported never having vaginal pain, they noticed that vaginal pain may occurred after menopause and believed that foreplay may reduce the symptoms.

"I experienced vaginal pain during coitus. Sometimes I want to refuse my husband's request but couldn't. So, even its painful, I have to serve him" (P4, 45 years).

Women's perception toward menopause

Respondents perceived menopause as a natural event for every woman above 45 years old and therefore it should be accepted as it is. Participants believed that being aged, although unfavorable for some women, it could not be avoided. Studies found, women's preparedness toward menopause may help to reduce the symptoms such as muscular pain, hypertension and else. Although women's perceptions toward menopause in this study relatively well, nevertheless, misconceptions remain. Participants believed that sexual intercourse during menopause might cause a swollen abdomen.

"The elders said that sexual intercourse after menopause might swell our abdomen" (P2, 48 years).

Nevertheless, respondents (P2, 48 years) also revealed that she has coped with weight gain in her menopause by performing a regular exercise 3 times a week for 45 minutes and maintain healthy diets.

DISCUSSION

Women's perception toward menopause is of important point to achieve a healthy aging. Studies found, women's preparedness in menopause help to reduce the unpleasant symptoms and other post-menopausal syndrome. Although it's considered as an individual response,¹¹ women's conceptions of the menopausal transition is also strongly influenced by socio-cultural environments where they are residing.¹²⁻¹⁵ Participants of the study revealed that their perception toward menopause was inherited from the elders in their society, including the myths and misconceptions regarding not having sexual intercourse after menopause.

Generally, women all over the world perceived menopause as a natural event.^{12-14,16,17} Likewise, women in the present study have been culturally taught

to accept menopause as an ordinary phenomenon marking the end of women's reproductive period. Decline in sexual activity following menopause therefore is common. Changes in the patterns of sexual activity among post-menopausal women is mostly caused by vaginal pain during coitus which induced by dryness of the vagina as the result of lowered level of estrogen and progesterone.^{7,9}

Not only adjustment in sexual activity patterns, cross-cultural studies on menopause revealed that many women in many parts of the worlds suffered from psychological and physical disturbances during their menopause. Although some of women may deny, menopause also referred to being aged, and it light up the fear of physical illness following menopause.¹⁷ Unlike the global phenomenon, participants of the present study admitted only experienced hypertension and hot flush as menopause symptoms and reported no psychological disturbance. Women's acceptance is believed as the protective factor for menopausal-related disorders. Acceptance to menopause is obtained from a cultural and religious construction that suggested women to acknowledge menopause as "destiny" and therefore should not be considered as stressful phenomenon. The acceptance then influences the hormone system to regulate better mood and happiness throughout the post-menopause period and reduce the symptoms and disorders.

It should be noted that, although most of women considered menopause as a natural event,^{12,18} experts suggested that it should no longer be advise so. Menopause should be seen as estrogen deficiency that may cause serious illness such as osteoporosis and heart disease, and therefore, should be treated properly.^{8,19} Although misunderstood their swollen abdomen as the result of engaging sexual activity during menopause,

participants of the present study also aware of the changes in their hormone system. With the lowered estrogen and progesterone, it may increase the risk of elevating cholesterol level. Therefore, hormone replacement therapy maybe one of the alternative to be prescribed for post-menopausal women, not only to reduce the likelihood of diseases, but also in order to achieve healthy happy aging.

CONCLUSION

Women of the present study acknowledged that menopause as the end of their reproductive period. It is believed as a natural event and will be experienced by every woman. Nevertheless, women's misconception and belief to menopause myths alarms the need for an adequate information related healthy menopause. Women preparedness is expected to reduce the symptoms and disorders following menopause.

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