



# No agony, much ecstasy

For Dr Patricia Weerakoon, Christian values go hand in hand with the joy of sex. **By Linda Vergnani**

health

**W**hen students see the middle-aged woman in a purple sari striding across the campus they greet her as Auntie Pat. But this is no ordinary Aunt. This one is on her way to introduce postgraduate students to an intensive session of erotic movies.

On her office door is pinned a cartoon dominatrix and her colleagues gave her a riding crop and spurs as birthday presents. She laughs at the risqué trophies adorning her wall. "It's all the theme of the dominatrix who runs the sex program. It's sexualising leadership qualities!"

For Sri Lankan-born Dr Patricia Weerakoon, the contradictions come with her specialist territory, sexology. A medical doctor, she is senior lecturer and academic coordinator of the University of Sydney's online Graduate Program in Sexual Health. The course, which she initiated, attracts students from around the world.

The erotic movies are intended to desensitise students to the

smorgasbord of sexual behaviours they may encounter at work. Most of the 70 students are from Australia, though she also tutors students from a dozen other countries, including Egypt, South Africa, Canada and Iceland. Those enrolled include general practitioners, nurses, counsellors, schoolteachers and other educators. She has even tutored two sex workers, who are now researching a PhD in sex and disability.

The "Auntie" moniker, used with genuine respect and affection, resulted from her appearance in ABC television's *Agony Aunts*, where, with help from an economist, they tried to sort out the sexual, relationship and financial problems of floundering baby boomers.

Weerakoon's passion for her subject, her professionalism, warmth and frankness inspire her students. In the windowsill of her office at the Cumberland campus are a tumble of soft toys in New Zealand sports gear. A Canterbury Crusaders cap hangs from her noticeboard. This

patriotic New Zealander is also an All Blacks fan. She looks matronly in a fuzzy jumper and pair of training shoes, yet it is her lively intellect and mischievous humour that holds sway.

Weerakoon says that despite the sexual revolution and the availability of explicit material in all media, sexuality education is as important and relevant now as it was 35 years ago when she trained. "That's because sex, even in today's world, is not accepted as something holistic and pleasurable between man and woman, man and man, or whatever."

She says sexual therapy and counselling encompasses a lot more than treating sexual dysfunction. "Today, because of the medicalisation of sexual dysfunction, people believe if you have erectile dysfunction you go to the doctor and get a blue tablet, or if you have pain during intercourse the doctor gives you something for it.

"But sex concerns the whole person. Even if you have a pathology, there is a psychological and social overlay and that's what therapy or



*It must be alright, because she is like our grandmother*

counselling is all about. Sex therapy is about looking at the person in a holistic way. It's about looking at pleasure and satisfaction, sexuality and sexual health. It's about a whole body, whole person experience, whether you are into single sex, homosexual sex or heterosexual sex."

Among the most common matters sex therapists deal with are myths or misconceptions - that sex must be spontaneous or that partners should have simultaneous orgasms, for example. They might need to counsel couples about what to do about desire discrepancy (where one or other might not want to make love as frequently) or how to deal with issues such as erectile dysfunction. Where necessary, therapists refer clients to medical doctors for treatment.

In couple counselling, Weerakoon teaches about the three Cs of good sex: commitment, comfort and communication. For a relationship to work, says Weerakoon, you need a degree of commitment and to feel comfortable with your partner. "You are going to be involved in the most intimate activity. You are going to take your clothes off and probably stick a bit of your anatomy into someone else's anatomy."

And it includes being comfortable when your skin wrinkles as you reach middle and old age. "You don't have to be trim and taut. You don't have to have the Botox and the breast enhancement and the labiaplasty because you are comfortable with each other as you are."

Within the faculty, Weerakoon facilitates a "Sexuality Research Group" of students, staff and external researchers. She notes that sex therapists also need to be comfortable with who they are while accepting that the sexual values, needs and practices of clients might be very different.

Weerakoon is comfortable with her own values. "Everyone knows that I am an evangelical Christian from the Sydney Anglican diocese" (one of the more conservative Anglican groups). Weerakoon is also faculty member of the University of New South Wales' Centre for Apologetic Scholarship and Education, which focuses on a Christian understanding of intellectual and social issues.

Apart from her university work she also teaches Christian youth groups about sex, which in the church context means heterosexual sex in

a committed relationship. Isn't it a contradiction for an academic and supposedly neutral sex therapist to teach Christian sex? "It's a hard line to walk," admits Weerakoon.

Other academics and researchers also ask "how, as a conservative Christian, I can teach sex?" She recently told a Kinsey Institute researcher that there was no contradiction because the Bible is a sex-positive book. "We worship a God who celebrates sex and desire."

Though she rarely has time for sex counselling nowadays, Weerakoon makes an exception for those she terms "Brownies" - Sri Lankans, Indians, Pakistanis and Nepalese. "Anyone who looks like me," she says. "Because if this post-menopausal, Christian, 38-years-married woman can stand up and say 'penis' and 'clitoris' it must be alright, because she is like our grandmother."

The daughter of a tea maker, she was raised in a conservative Tamil Christian household on a plantation in Watagoda, Sri Lanka. "In all the years I was growing up my family never talked about sex," she recalls, explaining that, as a young woman, she was expected to conform to a traditional female role. "But it didn't feel repressive to me as I accepted the rules were placed in love."

Yet she realised if she did not find a suitable career her parents would arrange a marriage for her. So she enrolled for a medical degree at the University of Colombo. Soon after graduating, she fell in love with a young engineer, "a wonderful, light-hearted man" who led the church choir. He was also Sinhalese, an ethnic group with whom Tamils were not meant to have any contact. Against strong opposition from both families, they married.

While the young doctor knew about reproductive sex, she was ignorant about the pleasures of sex. "Remember this was Sri Lanka, a developing country. I knew there was a vagina. I knew which aperture the penis went into and about ejaculation but apart from that I didn't know anything."

At the age of 28 she became a lecturer in the physiology department at Colombo and was startled to find that one of her duties would be teaching sex and reproduction. Handed an ancient copy of Masters and Johnson's *Human Sexual Response* as a primer, she was fascinated.

"I realised that people actually researched this and there was this thing labelled 'sexual response'. I realised you didn't just lie there and let it happen and have babies," says Weerakoon.

She decided to study sexology and teach people about sex so they could be "healthy and happy and sensual and sexual." She went on to do a Masters in Reproductive Health at the University of Hawai'i where she studied the biology of gender disorders under Professor Milton Diamond, a world expert on gender identity.

Returning to Sri Lanka, she set up a separate unit teaching sexual health and sex education in the medical faculty at Colombo University. For the next six years she was also much in demand as the country's sole sex therapist. But in 1983 Sri Lanka was riven by ethnic tension and virtual civil war. With a "cross-ethnic" marriage and a young son to care for, the Weerakoons decided to migrate to Australia in 1989. Weerakoon began teaching undergraduate courses in sexual health at the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Sydney and in 2004 started the online course in sexual health.

In her spare time, Weerakoon and her 32-year-old son Kamal are writing a novel about sexuality for young Christians. Kamal is an assistant minister in a local Presbyterian church. "He is quite proud of his mother being a sex therapist," says Weerakoon.

Dr Vijay Ramanathan has dropped by to demonstrate a newly acquired harmonica. He is a medical doctor and one of Weerakoon's research students. He came to the University from India to complete a Masters in Clinical Medicine in HIV and sexually transmitted infections but says he was inspired to study sexology after hearing just one of Weerakoon's lectures. With her encouragement, he enrolled in a single course, went on to complete a Graduate Diploma in Sexual Health and is now doing his doctorate.

"I would say Patricia doesn't see her subject apart from herself. She blends sexual health with her own personality. I still remember her opening remark: 'I'm a Christian, I'm a lady doctor from Sri Lanka and I love sexology,' or something like that. She really likes and loves her subject." **SAM**