

# Neat, discreet and unseen – young women’s views on vulval anatomy



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## BACKGROUND

Labiaplasty is the surgical reduction of the labia minora.<sup>1</sup> There has been a steady increase in Medicare claims (Figure 1) for this procedure, despite scarce data regarding the risks, benefits and outcomes.<sup>2</sup> No studies have explored young women’s knowledge and perceptions of their genital anatomy. Furthermore, General Practitioners (GPs) are unsure of how to handle requests for referral for labiaplasty and women’s motivations for seeking genital surgery are unexplored.

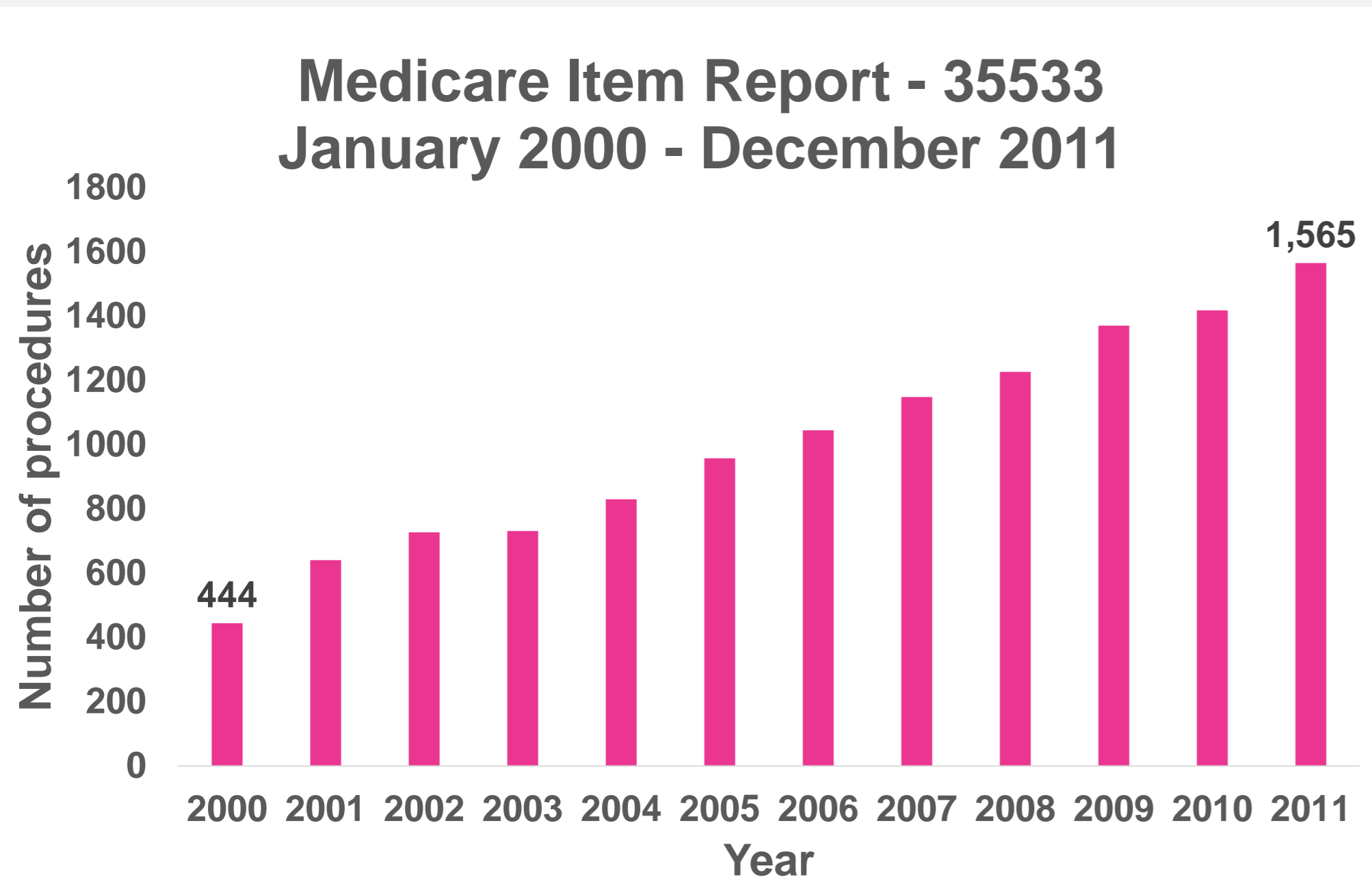


Figure 1: Medicare Item Number 35533 (labiaplasty and vulvoplasty) Report<sup>2</sup>

## RESEARCH QUESTION

What are young women’s views on “normal” and “desirable” vulval anatomy?

## METHODS

- Female students aged 18-28 years old.
- Recruitment via the University of Melbourne Student Portal and Snowball Sampling.
- Individual, semi-structured interviews conducted.
- 7 standardised photographs (including Figures 2-4) and an anatomical line drawing used to facilitate discussion.
- All interviews recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically.

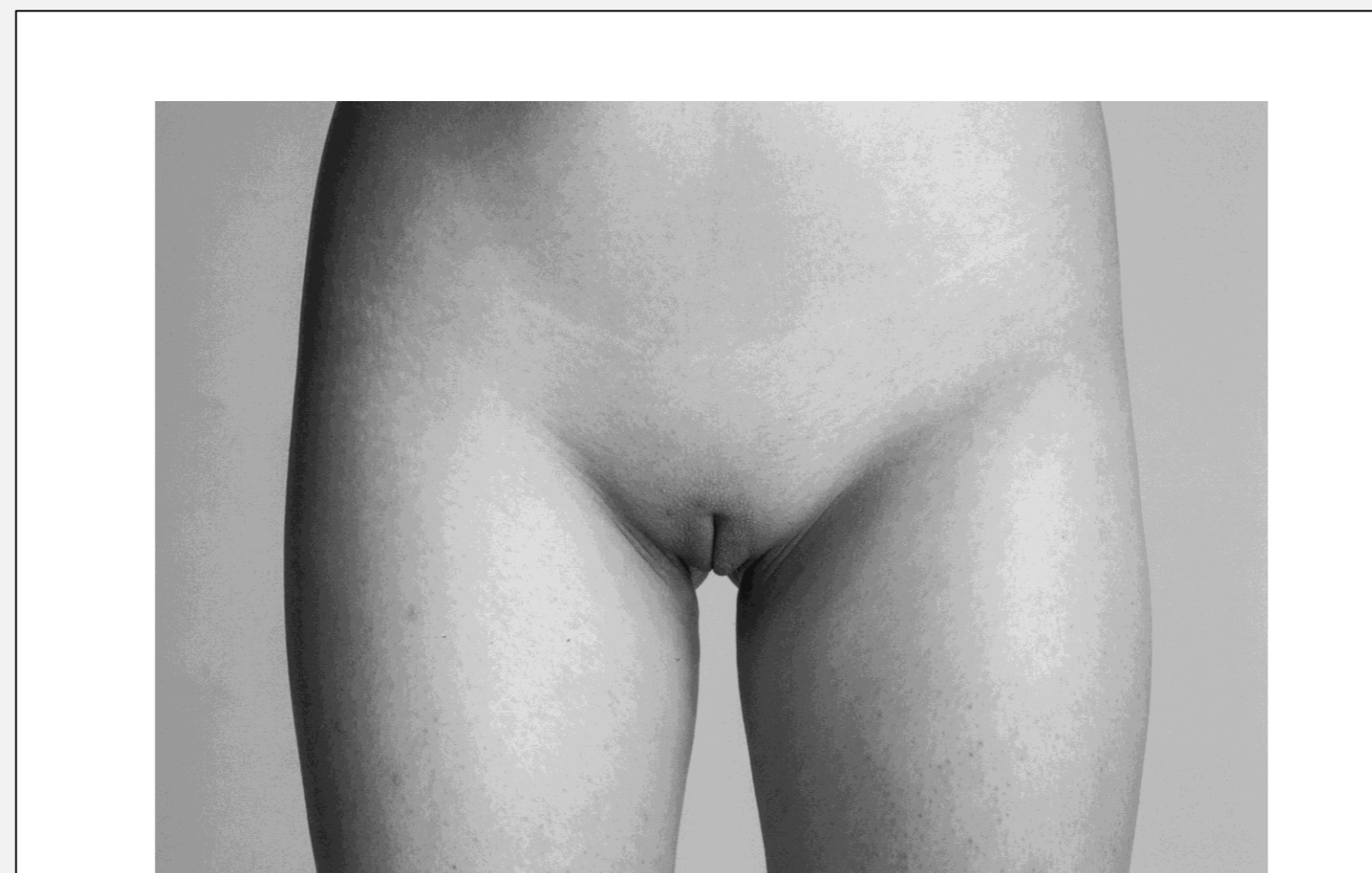


Figure 2: Hairless with no visible labia minora<sup>3</sup>

“Well probably, the “societal ideal”.” 514256

“This one is probably the one that people would look at as the most “ideal” cos there’s kind of nothing to see there, [...] it’s almost sort of Barbie doll level.” 915293

“Probably for women, it’s more about, [...] everything being small, and neat and pink, and tucked away.” 110174



Figure 3: Pubic hair with visible labia minora<sup>3</sup>

“Definitely not my “desirable” vagina because, that, part, whatever that is, is like, hanging out.” 415258

“It looks normal.” 79132

“I also think that bit protrudes a bit more than normal. But I don’t really know for sure.” 1815262

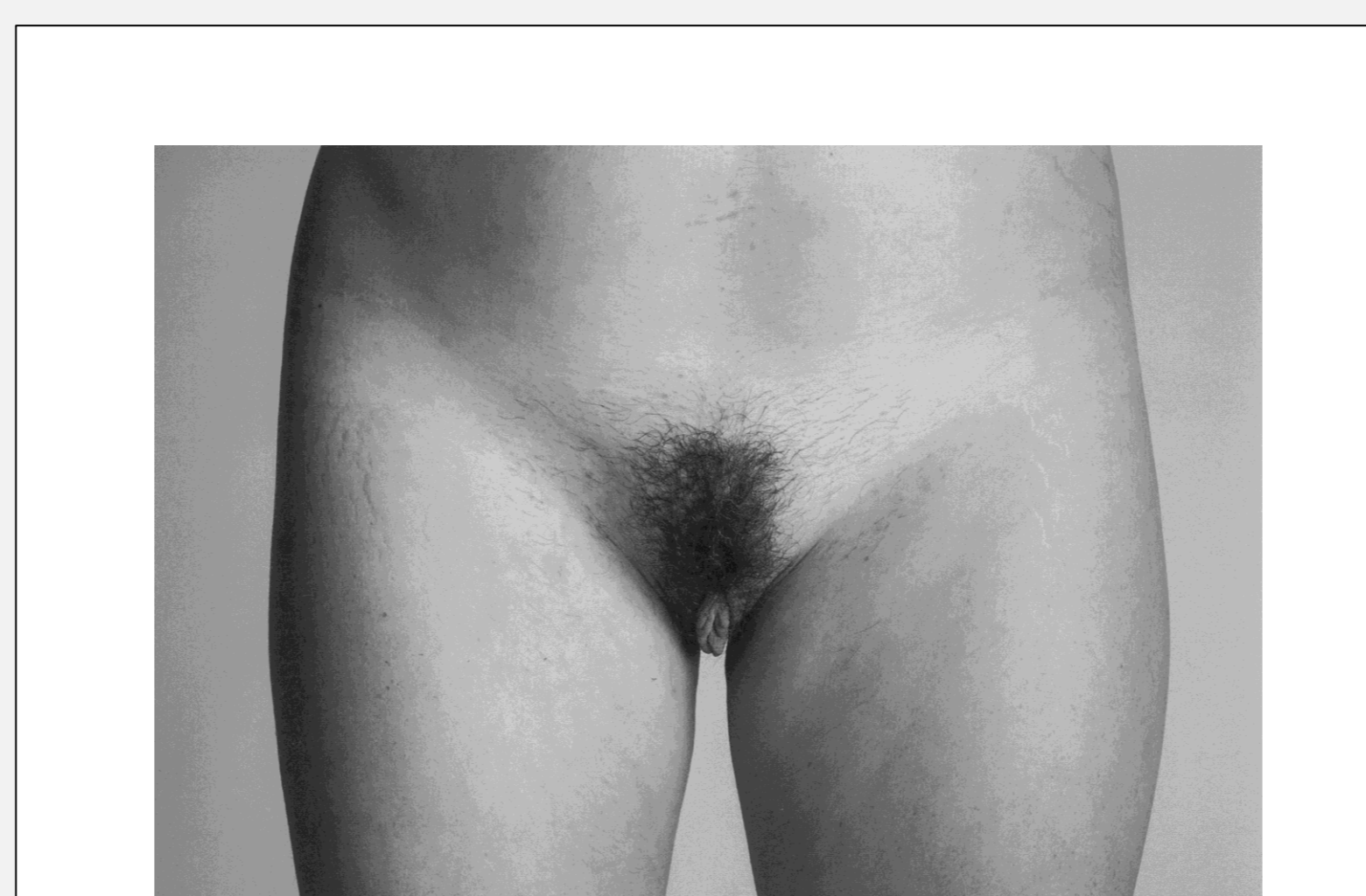


Figure 4: Pubic hair with visible labia minora<sup>3</sup>

“That’s not too strange, but it is, again, it’s a little bit less desirable because it hangs down a bit.” 313233

“Um, that looks normal to me.” 615283

“But this one’s abnormal.” 179145

## RESULTS

21 interviews conducted, 25-80 minutes.

Six major themes emerged:

- Participants’ views of “normal” genitalia
- Participants’ views of “ideal” genitalia
- Sources of information on genital anatomy
- Factors that influence women’s perceptions of “normal” and “ideal” genital anatomy
- Terms used to describe women’s genitals
- Views and knowledge of Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery (FGCS)

Young women are unsure what constitutes “normal” vulval anatomy. Despite this uncertainty, all participants identified Figure 2 as the socially accepted “ideal” vulva.

## IMPLICATIONS

*The Labia Library* is a good example of a resource where women can anonymously gain information about the range of “normal” anatomy.<sup>4</sup> GPs play an essential role in patient education and reassurance of normality. GPs receiving requests for referral for FGCS should explore women’s understanding of this.

## CONCLUSIONS

Results indicated that women would benefit from access to resources showing the range of normal vulval anatomy. It is important that doctors do not assume women have knowledge of their genitalia and the terms used to describe it.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>Liao L-M, Michala L, Creighton SM, *Labial surgery for well women: a review of the literature*, BJOG, 2010; 117:20-25.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Health and Ageing, Medicare Benefits Schedule Item Statistics Report: Item 35533 [Requested Medicare items processed from January 2000 to December 2011], Canberra, Australia.

<sup>3</sup>Werner, P. *101 Vagina*, Taboo Books, Melbourne, 2013.

<sup>4</sup>Women’s Health Victoria, *The Labia Library*, [www.labialibrary.org.au/](http://www.labialibrary.org.au/)

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