



Mr Mohamad
Nizam
Vanderbeek and
his children.
ST PHOTO:
DESMOND FOO

New father problems no one talks about

New fathers have emotional and physical needs too, but these issues tend to get sidelined with the focus on the mother and baby



Venessa Lee

Four months after they had their first child three years ago, Mr Mohamad Nizam Vanderbeek wanted to resume sexual relations with his wife.

But the 36-year-old was worried she would be too tired for sex. She had recently returned to work after maternity leave and the couple were both handling night feeds for their son.

His wife, a 33-year-old administrator, also had a Caesarean delivery and he was afraid she might not have recovered fully from the surgery.

"I wanted to resume intimacy earlier, but I was not sure if we could. I didn't want to ask her outright. We joked about it instead," recalls Mr Nizam, a technical executive in the real estate management sector.

It was a conundrum he faced again when they had their second child, a daughter, a year later.

Another concern the couple had was that their children – now aged three and two – slept with them on their bed when they were newborns.

They would feel "uncomfortable" being intimate with an infant on the bed, Mr Nizam says.

According to medical websites, there is no fixed time to resume intercourse after a Caesarean delivery, but some women wait about six weeks until after they have been cleared by doctors at their post-partum checks.

Mr Nizam's experience chimes with findings from the National Uni-

versity of Singapore's (NUS) research on new fathers, which was released to the media at the end of last month.

It found that "the main issue that emerged at six months postpartum was (the) sexual and emotional needs of fathers as mothers remained focused on babies", according to a press release by the university.

The series of studies, which involved quantitative surveys and in-depth qualitative interviews, was led by Assistant Professor Shefaly Shorey from the Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies, part of NUS' Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.

It was funded by the Ministry of Social and Family Development.

Dr Shorey tells *The Sunday*

Times: "There have been a lot of studies done on mothers, but people forget that with changing societal norms (such as more dual-income families), fathers are also increasingly involved in taking care of their newborns."

"Our series of papers aims to plug the shortage of documentation on paternal involvement during infancy, based on the unique Asian context of Singapore."

Referring to men's physical needs, including when to resume sex, Dr Shorey says: "Nobody talks about such things for men."

She notes that while there is more comprehensive support for the mother after childbirth, there is generally a dearth of "appraisal and emotional support for dads, who might wonder, 'Am I doing okay as a father?'"

Barriers to fathers getting more involved in early infant care include in-laws or confinement nannies excluding them from tasks such as bathing or soothing the baby, as they might be viewed as lacking the required skills, the research found.

Another hindrance is maternal gatekeeping, where the mother acts as the ultimate gatekeeper for anything related to the child, which may result in restricted access by fathers and other caregivers.

Dr Shorey says: "Fathers want to be involved but they (may be) sidelined."

She notes that fathers in Singapore have to get more involved in newborn care.

She pointed to studies in other countries which have shown that children whose fathers were not very involved when they were younger had behavioural issues later on.

The NUS studies recommended more paternity leave, better access to perinatal information and setting up peer groups to help fathers cope better with "the angst of parenthood".

The research also found that fathers who were hands-on in the early days of a child's birth were more likely to be similarly hands-on when the child is six months old.

Mr Nizam says he was excluded from the training nurses provided



When Mr Richard Lee and Ms Krisa Qiu's baby was born, they wanted to establish their own ways of caring for the child instead of listening to conflicting advice from parents, in-laws and healthcare professionals.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF RICHARD LEE

at the hospital after his son was born.

He did ask if he could join in when his daughter was born a year later.

Learning to change diapers, support his wife in breastfeeding positions and encourage the infant to suckle helped relieve the pressures of early infancy on his wife.

"I was better able to support my wife when my daughter was born. We are fully co-parenting. My wife is a working mother and I knew I had to support her," he says.

While both first-time and experienced fathers faced problems such as sleepless nights and feeding issues after the birth of their child, the NUS researchers found that conflicting advice from parents, in-laws and healthcare professionals added to the stress.

That was what Mr Richard Lee, 33, and his wife wanted to avoid when their first child, Ayla, now

five months old, was born.

"We wanted to find our own way of doing things," says the assistant vice-president at a bank. His wife, Ms Krisa Qiu, 31, is a yoga instructor.

Conflicting advice comes about partly due to generational differences, Mr Lee says.

For instance, Ayla had jaundice, a common condition among newborns.

It was addressed by breastfeeding but in the past, parents might have been more disposed to sunning the infant outdoors, he adds.

He is reaping the rewards of being a hands-on dad in the early days.

"My daughter smiles when she sees me," he says.

venessal@sph.com.sg