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Sexually transmitted diseases in elderly patients: a challenge to family medicine

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Sexually transmitted diseases (STD's) have traditionally been associated with younger populations. However, family doctors are now facing a new reality, due to the ageing of the western populations and the improvements in healthcare delivery. As such, elderly patients may also live with STD's. This poses a new challenge for family medicine practice, since these diseases are often asymptomatic. In this communication, we aim at presenting a clinical case report regarding an 80 year-old recently widowed woman who was diagnosed with syphilis. The patient presented with symptoms of memory loss and muscle weakness in both legs, and denied any risky sexual behaviour. We conducted a study to exclude reversible causes of dementia, which included a clinical interview and blood tests. The follow-up showed a positive result for VDRL, and the patient was adequately treated with penicillin. This case was confirmed by Treponema-specific tests and was referred to the public health department for an epidemiological study. She was also referred to the local hospital, where she is being followed by Dermatology. This case report demonstrates the need for vigilance regarding elderly patients and is a call-to-action for family doctors. In our daily practice we should be aware that a healthy ageing often means an active sex life, which therefore may lead to risky sexual behaviours. It is the duty of family medicine practitioners to look for the warning signs and to inform their patients on how to live a healthy sexual life.