

# ORGASM INC.

A film by Liz Canner

78 minutes, Color, 2010  
Digibeta, Stereo, 1.33 Aspect Ratio



First Run Features  
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## PRAISE FOR ORGASM INC.

"I loved *Orgasm Inc.* It's a great combination of educational, entertaining and angering – perfect." – Gloria Steinem

"Big Pharma's race for FDA approval of remedies designed to combat female sexual dissatisfaction has been extensive. And nearly a decade after she started shooting, Canner has completed an excellent historical record of their pursuit." – Anna Bean, *Bust Magazine*

"A sexy indictment of big pharma that gives a lot of great laughs." – *The Toronto Star*

"[*Orgasm Inc.*] is a desperately needed antidote to all the hype generated by pharmaceutical companies pursuing their holy grail: a female Viagra." – *Newsweek*

"A heartfelt plea for women to own their own sexuality, rather than relying on a prescription pill... Canner's subject matter and commitment to truth is absolutely compelling...it is an education, a call to action, and a celebration of just how very normal female sexuality can be." – Leslie-Stonebraker, *New York Press*

"Illuminating!" – *New York Magazine*

"Director and producer Canner took a serious, but sometimes comical look at the medicalization of women's sexuality – from the invention of the Dr. Stuart Meloy's "orgasmatron" for on-demand climax to cosmetic vaginal reconstruction – all in the name of some new kind of normalcy." – *ABC News*

"A jewel of a documentary." – *The Observer, UK*

"Maintaining a playful tone, Canner's film nevertheless serves as an indictment of greed at the expense of women who have too long been kept in the dark about their own bodies and sexuality." – *Indiewire*

"Liz Canner's informative, amusing, expertly crafted and well-lauzeled docu "Orgasm Inc." seizes the perfect platform from which to launch a common-sense attack on Big Pharma's shameless corporatization of health... Canner has fashioned a wry, often impassioned denunciation of corporate fear-mongering for profit." – Ronnie Scheib, *Variety*

"*Orgasm Inc.* is a terrific new documentary that delves into designer vaginas and other true life tales of the commodification of women's pleasure centers." – JoAnn Wypijewski, *The Nation*

"*Orgasm Inc.*, a biting new documentary, gives a behind-the-scenes look at the race to develop drugs, devices, and surgery to treat female sexual problems." – *Vogue Magazine*

"A must-see for women of all ages, for their partners, and for their physicians." – Jennifer Merin, *About.com Documentaries*

"Definitely arousing!" – *City News, Toronto*

"*Orgasm Inc.*, a film on female sexual dysfunction (FSD) by veteran documentarian Liz Canner, is heartbreaking in a way that no Hollywood romance could ever be." – *More Magazine*

## **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

In the shocking and hilarious documentary *Orgasm Inc.*, filmmaker Liz Canner takes a job editing erotic videos for a drug trial for a pharmaceutical company. Her employer is developing what they hope will be the first Viagra drug for women to win FDA approval to treat a new disease: Female Sexual Dysfunction (FSD). Liz gains permission to film the company for her own documentary. Initially, she plans to create a movie about science and pleasure but she soon begins to suspect that her employer, along with a cadre of other medical companies, might be trying to take advantage of women (and potentially endanger their health) in pursuit of billion dollar profits. *Orgasm Inc.* is a powerful look inside the medical industry and the marketing campaigns that are literally and figuratively reshaping our everyday lives around health, illness, desire – and that ultimate moment: orgasm.

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

After over a decade of producing documentaries on human rights issues such as genocide, police brutality, and world poverty, the violent images from my movies were giving me nightmares and making me depressed about the state of humanity. In order to change the script in my head, I decided my next project would be about pleasure, specifically, the science of female pleasure.

Then, strangely, while I was in the middle of shooting the movie, I was offered a job editing erotic videos for a pharmaceutical company that was developing an orgasm cream for women. The videos were to be watched by women during the clinical trial of their new drug. I accepted the job and gained permission to film my employers for my own documentary. I thought the experience would give me access to the secretive world of the pharmaceutical industry and insight into the latest scientific thinking about women and pleasure.

I did not set out to create an exposé, but what I uncovered at work compelled me to keep filming and investigating. This insider perspective allows the film to scrutinize the everyday patterns of pharmaceutical company work in order to explore a culture that has been perverted to place the drive for profit above our health. So much for pleasure...

## **FULL SYNOPSIS**

Along with meeting drug company CEOs, field testers, and number crunchers filmmaker Liz Canner encounters throughout the film, she encounters doctors, scientists and psychiatrists who are resisting the pharmaceutical industry's notion that sexual dissatisfaction is a "disease" that needs to be treated with a drug. Most of women's sexual problems, they believe, are due to cultural conditions -- relationship issues, sexual abuse, poor sex education, and stress from overwork. Their goal: stop corporate medicine before it is too late.

Throughout *Orgasm Inc.* important revelations are made and compelling characters are encountered who claim to hold the key to women's orgasm. We meet a doctor in Winston Salem, NC who is testing an Orgasmatron - electrodes inserted into the spine and activated at the press of a button. We encounter a medical device marketer, Lisa, who is deep in the process of launching Designer Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation surgery to "help" women look and feel young and tighter "down there". Ambivalent about the disturbing effects of cosmetic genital surgery, Lisa haltingly admits that she needs to quit her job on-camera. As *Orgasm Inc.* goes deeper, it reveals that many of the "treatments" for FSD have potentially dangerous and life-threatening side effects, including genital mutilation, breast cancer, and dementia.

Fortunately, all is not bleak on the sexual frontier, Liz also uncovers inspirational pioneers who are committed to leading others to true erotic fulfillment: a sex shop owner who crashes pharmaceutical conferences to educate the doctors who attend, a vintage vibrator collector who provides insight into the history of female "hysteria," and a professor whose monkeys have taught him to pay more attention to women. These visionaries believe that the key to sexual satisfaction is to change not just our sex lives but also our society.

As the film nears the finish line, Procter & Gamble pulls ahead of the other pharmaceutical companies. Its drug Intrinsa, a testosterone patch, touted to be the first drug to treat women with low sexual desire, goes before the FDA. At the heated hearing, activists face off against Procter & Gamble, battling not only over the drug's FDA approval but ultimately our future cultural and scientific understanding of sex.

The world is beginning to be saturated with ads for sex treatments for women. The drug companies and medical device manufacturers have already begun spending millions of dollars on marketing not only their treatments but also the 'disease'. The existence of both 'disease' and 'cure' is beginning to dominate all discussion of sexual dissatisfaction, conveniently sweeping major contributing factors under the rug. *Orgasm Inc.* provides an antidote to drug company marketing and scientific distortion, and will help to protect women from being deceived into undergoing unnecessary and possibly unsafe medical treatments. Upbeat, engaging, enlightening, and provocative, *Orgasm Inc.* will change the way you think about sex.

### Source List for Fact Screens

Time	Fact	Source
16:08	<p>“PMS” becomes “Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder”; “Creepy Crawly Legs” becomes “Restless Leg Syndrome”; “Shyness” becomes “Social Anxiety Disorder”; “Male Menopause” Becomes “Andropause”.</p>	<p>Angelmar, Reinhard, Sarah Angelmar, Liz Cane, “Condition Branding,” <i>Journal of Medical Marketing</i> 7: 4 (2007): 341–351.</p> <p>Moynihan , Ray and Alan Cassels, <i>Selling Sickness</i> (New York, New York; Nation Books, 2005)</p>
16:42	<p>The pharmaceutical industry is the third most profitable in the world.</p>	<p>Fortune 500 Annual Ranking of America’s Largest Corporations - Most Profitable Return on Revenues," <i>Fortune Magazine</i>, 4 May 2009. &lt;<a href="http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500/2009/performers/industries/profits/">http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500/2009/performers/industries/profits/</a>&gt;.</p>
21:26	<p>The potential risks of the Orgasmatron include shock, paralysis, epidural hemorrhage and cerebrospinal fluid leak versus unknown benefits.</p>	<p>“Important Safety Information and Risks: Medronic Neurostimulation Systems for Pain Therapy,” <i>Medronic Pain Therapies</i> (2008): 4-6.</p>
22:27	<p>43% of women suffer from female sexual dysfunction.</p>	<p>Laumann, Edward O., Anthony Paik, Raymond C. Rosen, “Sexual Dysfunction in the United States: Prevalence and Predictors,” <i>JAMA</i> 281 (1999): 537-544.</p>
22:31	<p>The authors of the <i>JAMA</i> article have financial ties to Pfizer.</p>	<p>“Omission of Financial Disclosure Information,” <i>JAMA</i> 281 (1999): 1174.</p>
30:36	<p>Clinical trials funded by pharmaceutical companies have 3-5 times the odds of reporting a favorable outcome than those funded by other sources.</p>	<p>Lexchin, Joel, Lisa A Bero, Benjamin Djulbegovic, Otavio Clark, “Pharmaceutical Industry Sponsorship and Research Outcome and Quality: Systematic Review,” <i>The British Medical Journal</i> 326:31 (2003): 1167 –1170.</p>
32:45	<p>70% of women need direct clitoral stimulation in order to climax.</p>	<p>Hite, Shere. <i>The Hite Report: A National Study of Female Sexuality</i> (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004)</p>

42:52	The Berman sisters were paid up to \$75,000 per day by pharmaceutical companies to promote diseases on news programs around the country.	O'Conner, Anne - Marie. "Laura Berman's Sex Rx," <i>Los Angeles Times</i> , 2 Oct 2005. < <a href="http://articles.latimes.com/2005/oct/02/magazine/tmsexresearch40">http://articles.latimes.com/2005/oct/02/magazine/tmsexresearch40</a> >.
46:02	The USA makes up just 5% of the world's population but it accounts for 42% of the world's spending on prescription drugs, and yet we don't live any longer than others.	Alfano, Sean. "A Nation of Pill-Takers," <i>CBS News</i> , 19 Aug 2007. < <a href="http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/10/22/sunday/main2112942.shtml">http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/10/22/sunday/main2112942.shtml</a> >.  Barlett, Donald L., and James B. Steele. "Why We Pay So Much," <i>Time Magazine</i> , 2 Feb 2004. < <a href="http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,993223,00.html">http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,993223,00.html</a> >.  US Department of Commerce, "Behind the Big Profits," <i>Time Magazine</i> , 2 Feb 2004. < <a href="http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101040202/pop/">http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101040202/pop/</a> >.
53:29	The potential risks of cosmetic genital surgery include scarring, infection, chronic pain, loss of sensation, and inability to have intercourse versus unknown benefits.	Conroy, Ronan N, "Female Genital Mutilation: Whose Problem, Whose Solution," <i>British Medical Journal</i> 333 (2006): 106-107.  American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, "Committee Opinion on Vaginal 'Rejuvenation' and Cosmetic Vaginal Procedures," <i>Obstetrics &amp; Gynecology</i> 110:3 (2007): 737-738.
55:11	Working women do on average 3 times more housework than men.	"Gender Equality 'is decades away'," <i>BBC News</i> , 5 Jan 2006. < <a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4582878.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4582878.stm</a> >.
55:44	1 in 6 women will be a victim of sexual assault in her lifetime.	Tjadan, Patricia, and Nancy Theonnes, "Prevalence, Incidence and Consequences of Violence Against Women Survey," <i>National Institute of Justice &amp; Centers for Disease Control &amp; Prevention</i> (1998): 2.
56:19	80% of women have body image issues.	Smolak (1996), as quoted on PBS.org, <i>Perfect Illusions: Eating Disorders and the Family</i> , < <a href="http://www.pbs.org/perfectillusions/eatingdisorders/preventing_facts.html">http://www.pbs.org/perfectillusions/eatingdisorders/preventing_facts.html</a> >.

1:15:38	There are now over 200 cosmetic genital surgery clinics worldwide.	The Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Institute of Los Angeles website, 2007-2008, as documented by The Way Back Machine archives: < <a href="http://web.archive.org/web/20080731151212/http://www.lvria.org/Associates.html">http://web.archive.org/web/20080731151212/http://www.lvria.org/Associates.html</a> >
1:16:16	Laura Berman is now America's leading expert on women's sexual health. She has appeared in over 135 radio and television programs.	Lexis Nexis

## **FILMMAKER BIO**

### **Liz Canner, Director, Producer, Camera, Editor**

*Orgasm Inc.* is award winning director Liz Canner's first feature documentary. Even before its release, *Orgasm Inc.* garnered awards and attention. Canner was recently named one of the top 10 independent filmmakers to watch in 2009 by Independent Magazine and honored with a Visionary Award from Dartmouth College for the movie.

Canner has created many innovative documentaries on human rights issues. *Deadly Embrace: Nicaragua, The World Bank and the IMF*, her film on the effects of IMF and World Bank policy was one of the first documentaries to look critically at globalization. It was used by over a thousand organizations worldwide as an organizing tool. Recently, Canner was honored with a prestigious Rockefeller Foundation Next Generation Leadership Fellowship for creating innovative media projects that strengthen democracy. She has also been the recipient of a Radcliffe Institute (Bunting) Film/Video Fellowship from Harvard University.

Since earning her BA with Honors in both visual arts and anthropology from Brown University, Canner has received more than 40 awards, honors, and grants for her work. Her recent projects have been supported by foundations such as The National Endowment for the Arts and The Paul Robeson Fund for Independent Media. Her documentaries have been broadcast on television on PBS stations, cable, and internationally in many countries. They have screened at festivals like The New York Film Festival (Video Sidebar) at Lincoln Center and the Human Rights Watch Film Festival. She has shown her work at numerous museums and galleries including Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the California Museum of Photography. She has served on the boards of directors of The Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers, the Boston Film and Video Foundation, White River Indie Films and Boston Cyberarts. She is the founder and director of Astrea Media, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating inventive media projects on social issues.

### **Filmography:**

*Orgasm Inc.* - 2009

*Hidden Tribe* - 2006

*Bridges* – 2004

*Moving Visions* - 2003

*www.symphonyofacity.org* - 2001

*Deadly Embrace: Nicaragua, The World Bank and the IMF* – 1996/1999

*State of Emergency: Inside The Los Angeles Police Department* – 1993

*Hands on the Verdict: The 1992 Los Angeles Uprising* - 1992

## CREDITS

### **Director, Producer, Editor and Cinematographer**

Liz Canner

### **Executive Producers:**

Julie Parker Benello

Wendy Ettinger

Judith Helfand

Marc Weiss

### **Edited by:**

Sandra Christie

Jeremiah Zagar

### **Original Score by:**

Stephanie Olmanni

Alex Barnett

Don Glasgo

### **Consulting Producer:**

Doug Block

### **Associate Producers:**

Sarah Canner

Jane Applegate

### **Additional Editing:**

Tricia Reidy

Becky Goldberg

Signe Taylor

### **Consulting Editor:**

T Woody Richman

### **Animation:**

Jay Beaudoin

Nicholas Fischer

### **Graphics:**

Jay Beaudoin

Max Berger

Einat Gavish

Noel Villers

**Researchers:**

Piya Kashyap  
Morgan Faust  
Elizabeth Gibson  
Glennis Gold

**Sound Designer and Mixer:**

Tom Paul

**Sound Editor:**

Erik Milano

**Mixed at**

The Cottage, Rockland County, NY

**Online Editor:**

John Fordham

**Post-Production Services:**

Frame Runner

**Post Production Sound:**

Gigantic Studios

**Funders:**

Chicken & Egg Fund  
The Fledgling Fund  
Moving Image Fund, LEF Foundation  
Portrero Nuevo Fund  
Puffin Foundation  
Radcliffe Institute For Advanced Study, Harvard University  
The Rockefeller Foundation Next Generation Leadership Fellowship



<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117944485?refcatid=31>

Posted: Tue., Feb. 1, 2011, 11:57pm PT

## Orgasm Inc.

An informative, amusing, expertly crafted and well-lauled docu.

By [Ronnie Scheib](#)

**Liz Canner's informative, amusing, expertly crafted and well-lauled docu "Orgasm Inc." seizes the perfect platform from which to launch a common-sense attack on Big Pharma's shameless corporatization of health, as firms try to capitalize on women's efforts to achieve the Big O. Demonstrating infinite ingenuity in inventing new diseases to be cured, pharmaceutical enterprises trotted out everything from designer vaginas to electronic "orgasmatrons" surgically wired to the spine. This must-see expose entertains as it horrifies and should enjoy a healthy bigscreen and smallscreen life after its Feb. 11 opening.**

After Viagra proved a runaway bonanza, drug companies decided to come up with a female variation on erectile inability: They lumped together every conceivable femme-related sexual problem, from pure relationship issues to surgical removal of reproductive organs, under the umbrella of "female sexual dysfunction," and raced each other to formulate a one-fix-fits-all cure. Helmer Canner, having accepted a job editing erotic videos used in pharmaceutical trials, found herself in ideal position to track this phenomenon. Given permission to film at work, she was granted amazingly candid interviews by doctors, salespeople, researchers and CEOs involved in the development of new drugs to fight FSD.

The fact that early tests were not encouraging did not stop the industry from pitching the disease. Canner provides a briskly edited cornucopia of clips illustrating how the airways were immediately flooded with reports of a devastating affliction that supposedly is shared by 43% of all women. Specialists, many corporately subsidized, sprang up overnight on newscasts and talkshows to fan fear and predict hope on the pharmaceutical horizon.

Scads of potential cure-alls are rushed into trials and proposed to the FDA, as helmer Canner whimsically depicts the competition as an animated race in which cartoon ointments, pills and patches -- all rendered with shapely female gams -- sprint across a bedspread to reach the finish line.

Canner makes clear that failure to reach orgasm is generally attributable to a slew of factors, few of them physiological. Thus, at regular intervals throughout the docu, Canner monitors the misadventures of Charletta, an intelligent, middle-aged woman who could not experience an orgasm vaginally. Charletta permits doctors to surgically implant "orgasmatron" electrodes, which merely make a leg twitch uncontrollably. Not until being informed that the majority of women require clitoral stimulation to climax does Charletta finally pronounce herself "cured" -- of the ignorance that caused her such anxiety.

Canner ascribes much of the FDA's disinclination to rubber-stamp these early entries, many similarly riddled with risky side effects, to the work of several concerned health professionals, chief among them Leonore Tiefer, whose well-researched, well-supported appearances at hearings have thus far stemmed the orgasmic tide.

The pic identifies other unnecessary procedures targeting FSD that have proliferated. Various cosmetic surgical trimmings, designed to "neaten" the labia, seem to grant developed countries a sanction for aestheticized genital mutilation. Canner, viewing the results on a computer, spontaneously exclaims, "They want to look like little girls!" Making no attempt at cold objectivity -- but thoroughly documenting her case over a nine-year period -- Canner has fashioned a wry, often impassioned denunciation of corporate fear-mongering for profit.

## the chart

<http://pagingdrgupta.blogs.cnn.com/2011/02/03/does-female-sexuality-need-to-be-fixed/>

February 3rd, 2011  
09:51 AM ET

# Does female sexuality need to be fixed?

*Ian Kerner, a sexuality counselor and New York Times best-selling author, blogs about sex on Thursdays on The Chart. Read more from him at his website, GoodInBed.*

At Good in Bed, many of our experts are buzzing about a new documentary called "Orgasm, Inc." Directed by Liz Canner, the film chronicles the race by pharmaceutical companies to get FDA approval on "pink Viagra"—a pill to help treat female sexual dysfunction, or FSD.

The problem with this approach? As the film demonstrates, there's no clear definition of FSD, which makes it difficult to determine whether it's a problem that needs "treatment" or simply an example of the differences between male and female sexuality. The truth is that no one really knows what FSD is: Some people liken it to male sexual dysfunction, but there are major flaws with this comparison. It's easy to tell when a man has premature ejaculation or erectile dysfunction. Female sexuality is less obvious. Women just don't show clear-cut physical signals when they're aroused.

Another reason that FSD is tough to define is because we tend to label men who don't climax during sex as "dysfunctional." Yet an estimated 75 percent of women never orgasm from penetrative sex alone—suggesting that this is normal, not problematic. So maybe we shouldn't be focusing on "fixing" female sexuality, but changing the ways we have sex so that women more consistently orgasm. Even researchers can't agree: In 2000, the Journal of Urology offered a few definitions on FSD, including:

- Lack of interest in sexual activity
- "Phobic avoidance" of sexual contact with a partner
- Inability to attain or maintain sexual excitement
- Difficulty attaining orgasm
- Genital pain or pain during intercourse

More than a decade later, there's still no consensus on which, if any, of these definitions is accurate. And experts aren't the only ones who are confused: Although studies suggest that the drug flibanserin could be the new "female Viagra," the FDA recently declined to approve its use

for FSD. In one 2010 study from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, researchers found that women with low sexual desire who took the medication for 6 months had an 18 percent improvement in their libido. But the FDA rejected flibanserin just a month later, saying it failed to completely prove efficacy in treating FSD.

Some critics say we shouldn't be "medicalizing" sex at all and don't need a pill to treat a condition that may be "all in her head." After all, lots of women often simply aren't in the mood for sex, or are distracted by life's stresses, or just need to start using lubricant. That doesn't mean they're dysfunctional. In fact, it may just mean they're normal: To that end, sex researcher Rosemarie Basson has proposed a new framework for thinking about female sexual response, one that places the importance of emotional intimacy and relationship satisfaction at its center. Basson's framework contends that female sexual arousal is more complex than a male's and depends more intensely on factors such as relationship satisfaction, self-esteem, and previous sexual experiences.

To me, the issue of FSD isn't black and white. Sure, FSD isn't as physically obvious as male sexual problems: Viagra works by increasing blood flow to the penis, giving a man an erection, while flibanserin appears to affect the neurotransmitters (chemical messengers) in a woman's brain that influence desire. But that doesn't mean that FSD doesn't have a physiological component. Side effects of medications (including some antidepressants, blood pressure drugs, and birth-control pills), shifting levels of hormones, stress and anxiety, obesity, and conditions including diabetes and multiple sclerosis can all lower a woman's desire. So FSD—if it indeed exists—isn't simply perception, just as it's not solely physical. My guess is that's a combination of brain and body—although whether a drug can effectively treat FSD remains unseen. Emily Nagoski, the author of *The Good in Bed Guide to Female Orgasms*, says, "There's no such thing as a sexual dysfunction that's 'all in your head.' Neither is there a sexual dysfunction that's 'all in your vagina.' There is only the embodied mind. Thus education and behavioral training change physiology."

In the meantime, there's no reason why women who want to want sex should suffer with low desire. Prescription testosterone cream may help boost desire women who have low levels of this important sex hormone, as can devices such as the Eros device, which uses a gentle vacuum pump to stimulate blood flow to the genitals. And don't discount all the "natural" ways that both women and men can increase sexual desire, from trying new things between the sheets to increasing intimacy outside the bedroom.



## Viagra for women: The quest for the perfect orgasm

*Is a female version of the little blue pill on the horizon? And if so, would that be a good thing?*

Last week, the media was worked into a breathless frenzy over the potential discovery of a "female Viagra." The results of a new study showed that a prototype drug made by Pfizer, the maker of Viagra, successfully increased blood flow to the genitals -- of female rabbits. That was all it took for news outlets to trumpet the imminent arrival of a sex drug for the ladies.

It was a bit of a déjà vu moment. In the past decade, there have been countless reports that the cure to female sexual arousal disorder (FSAD) -- an umbrella term that can sound awfully reminiscent of the hoary concept of female "frigidity" -- was right around the corner. Filmmaker Liz Canner knows this better than anyone: She spent nine years following the pharmaceutical industry's quest for a "female Viagra" for her documentary, "Orgasm Inc." The project began when she started editing erotic videos for a clinical trial for one such female arousal drug. Canner soon began to suspect that her employer -- along with many other pharmaceutical companies -- were exploiting women in pursuit of big bucks.

That isn't all that difficult to do in a society with a skewed perception of what is sexually "normal." One of the subjects of her film, Charletta, a gray-haired Southern woman in her 60s, went so far as to have electrodes surgically implanted near the base of her spinal cord and connected to a device called, in all seriousness, the "Orgasmatron" -- all because she was disturbed by her inability to climax without clitoral stimulation. She had no clue that the vast majority of women require more than the old in and out to come. The result of the invasive and debilitating surgery was that it caused her leg to twitch uncontrollably.

From Princess Marie Bonaparte, who had her clitoris surgically moved closer to her vagina in hopes of having orgasms during intercourse, to Charletta and her "Orgasmatron" to the current "designer vagina" trend, some women will go to extreme measures to feel sexually adequate and satisfied. Just imagine how many more would be interested in popping a pill for a fulfilling sex life.

I chatted with Canner over the phone about this latest study and the search for the Holy Grail of "lady Viagra."

**What did you think of the recent media circus?**

I was actually really surprised that the media jumped on the study because, to me, it doesn't actually tell us anything. It was a study that was done on bunnies. Well, I guess Hugh Hefner got us confused with bunnies, why not Pfizer? They say that this drug is going to help with female sexual arousal disorder. But all we know is that it's going to work on female sexual arousal disorder in bunnies.

**We keep seeing trial after trial where a drug, spray or gel successfully causes a woman's genitals to swell. What more are researchers aiming for, exactly?**

For these drugs to be approved by the FDA, they have to cause engorgement, but they also have to cause sexual satisfaction. Viagra causes engorgement of the genitals in men, but [in Pfizer's research] women didn't really care whether they were engorged. Their studies show that women weren't any more sexually satisfied even though they were engorged. They came back and said, "Women are more complicated than we thought."

The FDA actually set different standards for men and women. The end point for Viagra was engorgement -- it wasn't whether the man was sexually satisfied. If a man has orgasmic dysfunction those drugs don't help with orgasms. It's an interesting thing because the reality is that men *do* care whether their genitals are engorged but women don't.

**And yet they keep trying that same approach for women, don't they?**

I don't think that the drug industry is going to give up. They see this as a multibillion-dollar industry. We haven't been very educated about sex. Regular sex education rarely talks about where the clitoris is. If you have a population who isn't very educated about sex, it's easy to take advantage of them. They can advertise and convince everyone that there's something wrong with them.

**What has changed since you started working on your documentary?**

I think unfortunately -- or maybe *fortunately* -- I don't think we've made any scientific breakthroughs around female sexuality. I think we're headed in the wrong direction. We're looking for a magic bullet, the pill that's going to solve all of women's sexual problems. I'm not sure that a pill or patch or nose spray or surgery is going to cure most of women's sexual problems. It's complex. What we should be working on is a society that doesn't abuse women sexually, because we know that creates sexual problems for women. We should be working on equitable pay and employment. We should be working on comprehensive sex education so that people are fully educated about their bodies. All those resources could have gone toward doing that sort of thing instead.

I feel like every couple months there is a new wave of hype about "female Viagra." Every time it is proclaimed that it's *on the horizon* – and yet it still isn't here.

It's all about selling drugs as if they're selling you a car in order to keep people anticipating something and believing that it exists -- although I should note that a small percentage of women really *do* suffer from sexual dysfunction. They want to keep the hype going, so a lot of these drug companies are working with these P.R. firms that are placing these stories. This is why you keep seeing the hype. What we're witnessing right now is a cultural shift, a rewriting of our understanding of female sexuality.

**What do you think they will try next?**

I don't know, they're trying all sorts of different approaches. Originally, it started out looking at the genitals. They started out thinking, "If we just get women engorged," but it didn't work [as far as increasing sexual pleasure]. So then they moved up to changing the woman's body chemistry and that didn't really work well either: Women were getting breast cancer in the clinical trials. The last thing they were working on was using flibanserin, a drug that affects serotonin levels. It was making women less inhibited and that was being connected to sexual pleasure. A study found that it gave women 0.8 more sexually satisfying experiences than the placebo -- whatever that means. I think they should just start selling sugar pills.

Tracy Clark-Flory is a staff writer at Salon. Follow [@tracyclarkflory](#) on Twitter. [More Tracy Clark-Flory](#)

## The Selling of the Female Orgasm

### ***A provocative new documentary targets Big Pharma's quest for a female Viagra***

by Barbara Kantrowitz and Pat Wingert May 23, 2010

You can't help but feel the anguish of Charletta, a charming 60-something Southerner who appears prominently in Liz Canner's new documentary, *Orgasm Inc.* Charletta is so distraught about her inability to achieve orgasm simultaneously with her husband during intercourse that she agrees to be a test subject for a bizarre invention called an "orgasmatron." But inserting this questionable device in her spine stimulates only her left leg, which shakes uncontrollably when she flips a switch. After the orgasmatron is removed, Charletta shares with Canner her distress at being such a freak. "Not only am I not normal, I'm diseased," she says. But under questioning by Canner, Charletta discloses that she can, in fact, achieve orgasm in other ways. When Canner tells her that makes her "normal," since 70 percent of women don't reach orgasm during coitus, Charletta is stunned. By the end of the film, she seems like a new woman. With a big smile on her face, she tells Canner, "I accept myself the way I am." If more women could make such a statement, Canner wouldn't have spent much of the last decade making *Orgasm Inc.* But the film, which has its New York premiere May 27 at the Film Society of Lincoln Center, is a desperately needed antidote to all the hype generated by pharmaceutical companies pursuing their holy grail: a female Viagra. Canner hit on the topic after years of doing documentaries on subjects like human-rights abuses, police brutality, and poverty. Looking for something more upbeat, she was researching female sexuality when she got a call from the pharmaceutical company Vivus, which wanted her to create erotic videos to use in their clinical study of an "orgasm cream" for women.

Vivus had had an initial success with a product for men called Muse, a pellet inserted into the urinary opening with a plastic applicator. The product launched more than a year before Viagra. When the much easier-to-use Viagra pill quickly overcame Muse as the market leader, Vivus started looking at ways to make a product for women's sexual problems. Canner was bewildered by the purported disease that the new Vivus product was intended to cure—something called "female sexual dysfunction." "They were telling me that 43 percent of women had this disorder, which I found amazing," Canner says. "How could that be true if I had never heard of it before?" That question set Canner off on a cross-country quest that included visits with scientists, experts in erotica, and individual women who often suffered profoundly because their sex lives didn't live up to the glowing imagery displayed in popular culture. She found that the often-cited 43 percent figure actually refers to a 1994 [study](#) of all kinds of sexual problems, including a lack of sexual

desire, anxiety about performance, and pain during intercourse. Canner ultimately concluded that the catch-all female sexual dysfunction is essentially a phony disease made up by pharmaceutical companies. “A lot of this is about marketing,” she says. “They are trying to sell disorders.” A spokesman for the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, an industry trade group, said she couldn’t discuss Canner’s charge since “as a trade association we can’t really comment about issues that are specific to individual companies.”

Viagra’s phenomenal success inspired drug companies like Vivus to search for a product that could solve women’s sexual issue with a similar quick fix. That search hasn’t been particularly successful. Pfizer, the maker of Viagra, gave up on creating a similar product for women after eight years of research because, the company said, women’s sexual problems were too complex to be fixed with a pill that targeted the genitals. Vivus also gave up on its attempt to create an orgasm cream for women. One highly touted product, Intrinsa, a testosterone patch from Procter & Gamble, was rejected by a U.S. Food and Drug Administration advisory panel in 2004 because of safety and efficacy concerns (it became available in Europe three years ago).

On June 18, the FDA will hold a hearing on the drug [flibanserin](#), from the German manufacturer Boehringer Ingelheim, which was initially tested as an antidepressant. It didn’t lift mood, but it did heighten sexual interest and reduce inhibitions—which led the company to test it on women who were suffering from a lack of sexual desire. The results, presented late last year at the Congress of the European Society for Sexual Medicine in Lyon, France, showed that women in the North American part of the trial who took flibanserin for about six months increased their number of “sexually satisfying events” (including orgasm) to an average of 4.5 from 2.8.

That may sound impressive, but consider this: women in the placebo group increased their average to 3.7. Is the difference between 4.5 and 3.7 significant enough to justify approval and overcome any potential health risk?

That’s what the FDA will have to decide. There may be cheaper and faster ways to reduce inhibition—like a glass of wine and a more attentive partner. And the European women didn’t experience the same benefit as their North American sisters, perhaps because they already are less inhibited.

One of the heroines of Canner’s film is [Leonore Tiefer](#), a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at the New York University School of Medicine. Tiefer calls herself a “sexologist”: she has been studying human sexuality for four decades. She led a campaign against Intrinsa’s approval and hopes that *Orgasm Inc.* will inspire people to “come down to Washington to raise a little hell” during the flibanserin hearing. Tiefer argues that no single drug could possibly cure all of women’s sexual problems because there are so many potential causes for a woman’s inability to

enjoy sex. Male impotence is essentially a mechanical problem that can be cured by a medication that enables erection. But women may turn away from sex for many reasons: physical, emotional, psychological.

Tiefer says sites like [sexbrainbody.com](http://sexbrainbody.com) sponsored by Boehringer Ingelheim “get the idea in women’s minds that there is a safe and simple solution to their problems so they don’t have to talk to their doctors, they don’t have to talk to their husbands, they don’t have to talk to anybody about this.” Neuroscience about how the brain works to influence sexual desire is still primitive, Tiefer says. “The idea that you have to rebalance your brain? That’s just ludicrous.”

The people who created the [sexbrainbody.com](http://sexbrainbody.com) site say they are helping women learn more about sexual problems. “All women experience sexual dysfunction at some point in their lives,” said Linda Jo Parrish, vice president for institutional advancement at the [Society for Women’s Health Research](http://SocietyforWomensHealthResearch.org). The cause could be the birth of a baby, menopause, or stress, she says. “To say this is a ‘made-up’ condition does a disservice to women—their health and their relationships—and prevents women from talking about their concerns with health-care providers and partners.”

But women’s health advocates agree with Tiefer. “There is more to good sex than a pill,” says Cynthia Pearson of the National Women’s Health Network. “We can’t let someone’s business model that requires a patentable solution get in the way of a broader inquiry.” Flibanserin’s potential benefit—slightly less than one more sexually satisfying event a month—doesn’t impress her. “Women need to know what’s behind the development of this and other drugs, and just how flimsy the evidence for FSD really is,” she says. “We’ll take advantage of the hearing to make the statement, once again, that we are concerned about drug companies that stress the advantages and play down the risks,” Pearson said. “I don’t think we have as high-level worries about this one as we did about Intrinsa because this one is not a hormone. But I still think there are a lot of warning flags waving on this one and we need to take it seriously.”

*Orgasm Inc.* also highlights the increased use of cosmetic vaginal procedures that claim to produce “designer vaginas” with such highly questionable practices as trimming vaginal lips, tightening vaginas, and injecting collagen. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists has warned against these procedures, pointing out that there is great variety in the appearance of the vaginal area and most of those differences are normal. In the film, Harvard Medical School professor Susan Bennett calls any unnecessary surgery to the vaginal area “a form of genital mutilation.” “We shouldn’t allow it,” Bennett says.

Canner hopes the film will help women be more skeptical about drug-company claims. (A national theatrical release of the film in the U.S. is in the works and the DVD of the movie is currently available at [www.orgasminc.org](http://www.orgasminc.org)). “A lot of this happens because in the U.S., drug companies have the right to advertise to consumers,” she says, “so they can directly market this stuff to women or they can market this stuff to women’s partners. I think there is a great danger that many healthy women could end up taking drugs that could harm them to fix a disease they don’t have.” What does make a woman more receptive to sex? That’s still something of a mystery. Emory University psychologist [Kim Wallen](#), who is interviewed in the film, has been studying the interaction of hormones and social influences on sexual behavior for many years. Much of his work consists of observing monkeys at the [Yerkes National Primate Research Center in Atlanta](#). He has what could be the film’s best line. As Wallen and Canner watch monkeys engaged in an elaborate sexual dance, she asks him what he has learned about sex by studying primates. Wallen thinks for a moment and then says, “Pay more attention to females.” That’s better than a pill any day.