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Special Contribution

Executive summary: Stages of Reproductive Aging Workshop (STRAW)

M. R. Soules[*†], *S. Sherman*[‡], *E. Parrott*[**], *R. Rebar*[†], *N. Santoro*[††], *W. Utian*[‡‡,***] and *N. Woods*[***,†††]

*Division of Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility, University of Washington; †American Society for Reproductive Medicine; ‡Clinical Endocrinology and Osteoporosis Research, National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health (NIH); **Reproductive Medicine Gynecology Program, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH; ††Division of Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility, Albert Einstein College of Medicine; ‡‡Case Western Reserve University; ***North American Menopause Society; †††School of Nursing, University of Washington, USA

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ABSTRACT

A select group of investigators attended a structured workshop, the Stages of Reproductive Aging Workshop (STRAW), at Park City, Utah, USA, in July 2001, which addressed the need in women for a staging system as well as the confusing nomenclature for the reproductive years.

INTRODUCTION

The Stages of Reproductive Aging Workshop (STRAW) was held in Park City, Utah, 23–24 July 2001. There were 27 invited participants, most of whom had extensive clinical and/or research experience in reproductive aging in women. The sponsors were the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM), the National Institute on Aging (NIA), the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and the North American Menopause Society (NAMS). The purpose of the workshop was to address the absence of a relevant staging system for female reproductive aging as well as the frustration with the current nomenclature.

The format of the workshop was focused presentations on menstrual cyclicity, endocrinology, pelvic anatomy, symptoms in other organ systems, nomenclature, fertility, and both clinical and basic research gaps in relation to reproductive aging. After each presentation there was a panel discussion followed by a group discussion. Later there were break-out groups that sought agreement on the practical utility of different signs and symptoms for a staging system. Subsequently, the leaders from each of the break-out groups presented their recommendations to all the participants, which were then melded into a combined staging system (Figure 1). Each point in the proposed staging system was accepted by at least a super-majority (70%) of the participants (there was unanimity on most points).

Correspondence: Dr M. R. Soules, 4225 Roosevelt Way NE, #305, Seattle, WA 98105, USA

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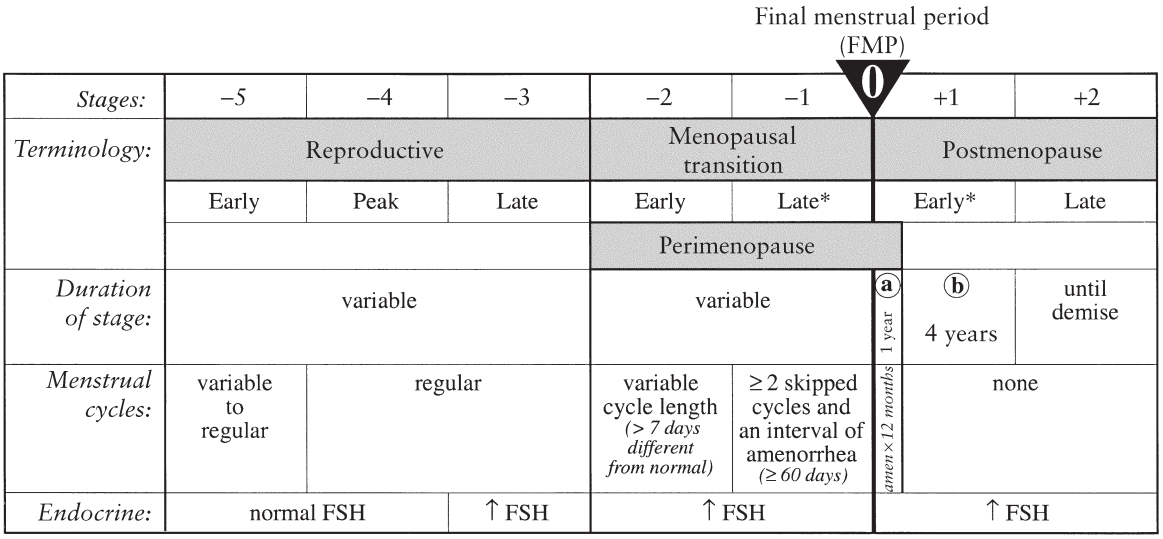

Figure 1 Recommended staging system. *Stages most likely to be characterized by vasomotor symptoms; FSH, follicle stimulating hormone; ↑, elevated; amen., amenorrhea

Women do not begin reproductive function (puberty) nor end it (menopause) at a particular chronological age. Both puberty and the menopausal transition are dynamic periods for the reproductive axis, during which development or senescence occurs in a relatively rapid fashion. While there is a useful staging system for puberty (the Tanner–Marshall system[1]), heretofore there has been no similar staging system for late reproductive function. The need (demand) for a staging system has been most apparent to the biomedical research community, but the intended audience of the workshop also included two secondary groups: health practitioners and the public. The specific goals of the reproductive aging workshop were to:

(1) Develop a relevant and useful staging system;

(2) Revise the nomenclature;

(3) Identify knowledge gaps (both clinical and basic) that should be addressed by the research community.

Background and significance

Aging can be defined as the natural progression of changes in structure and function that occur with the passage of time in the absence of known disease. The female reproductive axis is essentially composed of the hypothalamic–pituitary– ovarian axis and the Müllerian-derived structures (such as the uterus). The reproductive axis ages to a non-functional state (menopause) much earlier than the other organ systems, at a time when a woman is otherwise healthy. The basis of reproductive senescence in women is oocyte depletion in the ovary. A woman is endowed at birth with a finite number of oocytes that are arrested in prophase I of meiosis. Reproductive aging consists of a steady loss of oocytes from atresia or ovulation, which does not necessarily occur at a constant rate. The relatively wide age range (42–58 years) for reproductive failure (menopause) in normal women would seem to indicate that females are either endowed with a highly variable number of oocytes and/or lose them at a highly variable rate.

Reproductive aging is a natural process that begins at birth and proceeds as a continuum. Clearly it is a *process* and not an *event*, and the end (menopause) is much easier to identify than the beginning. With the realization that chronological age is a very poor indicator, the purpose of a staging system would be the identification of where a given woman was in the process of reproductive aging.

SUBJECTS

Until recently, there has been a paucity of interest and of studies in reproductive aging. An understanding of the pattern of reproductive senescence in normal healthy women is just now emerging. Most of the current medical information in this field has come from studies of a rather narrow segment of the population (Caucasian women of mid- to upper socioeconomic means). There appears to be racial, ethnic, cultural, geographic and socioeconomic diversity in the signs and symptoms of reproductive aging. Given these considerations, the workshop concentrated on

developing a staging system for all healthy women who age spontaneously to a natural menopause. While all women are likely to experience similar signs and symptoms as they develop ovarian failure, we recommend not applying this staging system in the following circumstances:

(1) Cigarette smoking;

(2) Extremes of body weight (body mass index < 18 or > 30 kg/m^2;

(3) Heavy exercise (> 10 h/week of aerobic exercise);

(4) Chronic menstrual cycle irregularity;

(5) Prior hysterectomy;

(6) Abnormal uterine anatomy (e.g. fibroids);

(7) Abnormal ovarian anatomy (e.g. endometrioma).

CRITERIA FOR IDEAL STAGING SYSTEM

An ideal staging system would adhere to the following criteria:

(1) Use only objective data because symptoms are inherently subjective;

(2) Employ only reliable tests that are relatively inexpensive and readily available;

(3) Allow women to be placed in the appropriate stage prospectively;

(4) Inclusion in one stage would preclude placement in another stage.

THE STAGING SYSTEM

A dominant pattern for reproductive senescence has been identified which is the basis for the recommended staging system (Figure 1). However, it must be recognized that not all healthy women will follow this pattern. While most normal women will progress from one stage to the next, there will be individuals who 'see-saw' back and forth between stages or skip a stage altogether.

The workshop participants considered a number of potential components of a staging system: menstrual cycles, endocrine/biochemical factors, fertility, signs/symptoms in other organ systems and uterine/ovarian anatomy. Each component was discussed separately. The anchor for the staging system is the final menstrual period (FMP). Prior to the FMP, there are five stages (Figure 1); the age range and duration for each of these five stages are variable.

The staging system that was developed at the workshop has seven stages; five precede and two follow the FMP. Stages –5 to –3 encompass the Reproductive Interval; –2 to –1 the Menopausal Transition; and +1 to +2 the Postmenopause (Figure 1).

Menstrual cyclicity

After menarche (and entry into Stage –5), it usually takes several years to assume regular menstrual cycles, which should then occur every 21–35 days for a number of years (Stages –4 and –3). There is no clear demarcation between Stages –5 and –3 since there is a gradual and imperceptible rise and decline in fertility over a number of years. A woman's menstrual cycles remain regular in Stage –2 (early menopausal transition), but the length changes by 7 days or more (for example, her regular cycles are now every 24 instead of 31 days). Stage –1 (late menopausal transition) is characterized by two or more skipped menstrual cycles and at least one intermenstrual interval of 60 days or more. While duration and/or amount of menstrual flow often changes during the menopausal transition, these changes were considered to be highly variable and therefore not included in the staging system. Several prospective longitudinal studies of menstrual cyclicity have documented that many women are poor historians in relation to even their recent menstrual history; it is recommended that investigators and clinicians confirm menstrual histories by asking women to keep prospective menstrual calendars. A sonogram or other imaging modality of the uterus should be employed at baseline and periodically (every 2–3 years) to document that uterine bleeding is due to hormonal changes and not uterine pathology (e.g. leiomyoma, adenomyosis).

Endocrine

Rudimentary knowledge of the endocrinology of the menstrual cycle is all that is necessary to use the staging system. A follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) elevation is the first measurable sign of reproductive aging. This initial FSH elevation is most prominent in the early follicular phase of the cycle; a single venous blood sample should be obtained between cycle days 2 and 5 (the first day of flow is day 1) and subsequently assayed for FSH and estradiol. Serum FSH immunoassays are readily available and relatively inexpensive. The

initial elevation in the late reproductive Stage –3 is subtle; while clinicians often use 10 mIU/ml as the cut-off value, in the research setting it would be best to determine the actual level for a particular laboratory in a young control population from Stage –4 (peak reproductive). An FSH elevation would be an early follicular phase level that exceeds two standard deviations of the mean level for a population of normal women of peak reproductive age (for example, age 25–30 years). In the late reproductive stage, the estradiol level in the early follicular phase is either normal or elevated; if it is elevated it can suppress what otherwise would be an FSH elevation and, therefore, the FSH level should only be interpreted in the context of a simultaneous estradiol level. An elevated FSH level in a single cycle is significant, sufficient to place a woman in Stage –3, and does not need to be repeated. However, a normal FSH level in a 40–45-year-old woman with regular cycles will be elevated in a preceding or subsequent cycle about 30% of the time. Therefore, it is recommended that a second FSH level be obtained if the first is normal. It is recognized that FSH levels increase gradually throughout the menopausal transition, but the variability is high and it would be exceedingly difficult to identify meaningful cut-off levels for Stages –3 to +1.

There are significant and predictable changes in other reproductive hormones during the menopausal transition: estradiol levels eventually fall, luteinizing hormone (LH) levels change later than FSH but gradually increase, and progesterone levels decrease as ovulation ceases. But the variability of each of these hormone changes is high, thus diminishing their utility for a staging system. A fall in inhibin B is the basis for the FSH rise with ovarian aging, but use of this difficult and relatively unavailable assay would not contribute to this staging system. Serum hormone assays are more readily available and validated, but urinary hormone assays provide a more integrated picture of hormone secretion over a period of time. In the research setting, it may be useful to use serum assays when cycles are regular, and urine assays in the late menopausal transition (Stage –1) when cycles are irregular. Normative data are not as readily available for urinary assays as they are for serum assays.

Symptoms

Some women start to experience various symptoms including vasomotor symptoms, breast tenderness, insomnia, migraines, and premenstrual dysphoria during late reproduction (Stage –3). Also, in the late menopausal transition, genital atrophic symptoms and problems in sexual function can occur as well. Not all women have symptoms as they transition to the menopause, and women with symptoms experience them in different combinations and with different levels of intensity. These symptoms are subjective by their nature, which makes quantification difficult. It has been observed that symptomatology varies markedly between ethnic groups, cultures and socioeconomic groups, and even in different climates. Furthermore, these symptoms do not track closely with the menstrual cycle or endocrine changes during the menopausal transition. Vasomotor symptoms are the most frequent and prominent of the menopausal symptoms; women in Stages –1 and +1 frequently experience the onset or increased intensity of vasomotor symptoms.

Fertility

A woman's peak fertility occurs in her mid- to late 20s and decreases progressively until menopause (Stages –4 to –1). The loss of fertility is the first sign of reproductive aging that precedes the monotropic FSH rise and changes in menstrual cyclicity. However, fertility was not included in the staging system because relative fertility in an individual is nearly impossible to measure, and is co-dependent on the fertility of the male partner.

Imaging

The workshop considered imaging of the pelvic organs by various modalities (e.g. ultrasound, magnetic resonance imaging, computed tomography) for their potential to contribute to a staging system. For practical purposes, the best imaging modality is sonography. Uterine sonography did not seem applicable to a staging system *per se*, but may be used to rule out uterine pathology as a cause of uterine bleeding. Ovarian pathology (for example, dermoid) may be ruled out with ultrasound as well, because it could also affect reproductive aging. Ovarian sonography, specifically antral follicle (2–10 mm) counts, appears to be very promising for use in a future revision of the staging system. The number of antral follicles in the ovary do not vary over the menstrual cycle, correlate well with chronological age and probably reflect the size of the reserve pool of primordial follicles. However, there is currently a paucity of studies of antral follicle counts in women during the menopausal transition.

NOMENCLATURE

The workshop participants recognized the current confusion and duplication in the nomenclature as applied to female reproductive senescence. The World Health Organization (WHO) has attempted to address these concerns on several occasions (most recently in 1996[2]). The Council of Affiliated Menopause Societies (CAMS) convened a working group to define further the terminology in 1999[3]. The WHO and CAMS definitions generally have vague starting points and use terms such as premenopause, perimenopause, menopausal transition and climacteric that overlap.

Our recommendations for a revision in the nomenclature appear in Figure 1, and are given below.

Menopause This is the anchor point that is defined after 12 months of amenorrhea following the final menstrual period (FMP), which reflects a near complete but natural diminution of ovarian hormone secretion.

Menopausal transition Stages –2 (early) and –1 (late) encompass the menopausal transition and are defined by menstrual cycle and endocrine changes. The menopausal transition begins with variation in menstrual cycle length in a woman who has a monotropic FSH rise, and ends with the FMP (not able to be recognized until after 12 months of amenorrhea).

Postmenopause Stage +1 (early) and Stage +2 (late) encompass the postmenopause. The early postmenopause is defined as 5 years since the FMP. The participants agreed that this time period is relevant, as it encompasses a further dampening of ovarian hormone function to a permanent level as well as the period of accelerated bone loss. Stage +1 was further subdivided into segment 'a', the first 12 months after the FMP, and 'b', the next 4 years. Stage +2 has a definite beginning, but the duration is variable since it ends with the woman's death. Further divisions may be warranted as women live longer and more information is accumulated.

Perimenopause This means literally 'about or around the menopause'. It begins with Stage –2 and ends 12 months after the FMP. The *climacteric* is a popular but vague term that we recommend be used synonymously with perimenopause. Generally speaking, the terms perimenopause and climacteric should not be used in scientific papers, but only with patients and in the lay press.

The success of the Workshop will depend on whether investigators, clinicians and others find this staging system/nomenclature useful. We recommend it as a distinct improvement over the current situation: a non-existent staging system and confusing nomenclature. However, the participants recognized that this is a 'work in progress', and expect to make revisions in the future as more knowledge becomes available.

STRAW Planning Committee

Michael R. Soules, MD, Co-Chair
Professor and Director, Division of Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, University of Washington;
President, American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM)

Sherry Sherman, PhD, Co-Chair
Director, Clinical Endocrinology and Osteoporosis Research, National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health (NIH)

Estella Parrott, MD, MPH
Program Director, Reproductive Medicine Gynecology Program, Center for Population Research, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health (NIH)

Robert Rebar, MD
Associate Executive Director, American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM)

Nanette Santoro, MD
Professor and Director, Division of Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility, Albert Einstein College of Medicine

Wulf Utian, MD, PhD
Professor Emeritus, Case Western Reserve University; Executive Director, North American Menopause Society (NAMS)

Nancy Woods, RN, PhD
Dean, School of Nursing;
Professor, Family and Child Nursing, University of Washington;
Past President, North American Menopause Society (NAMS)

STRAW participants

Nancy Avis, PhD, Wake Forest University School of Medicine
Henry Burger, MD, Monash University (Australia)
Sybil Crawford, PhD, University of Massachusetts
Lorraine Dennerstein, MBBS, PhD, University of Melbourne (Australia)
Gregory F. Erickson, PhD, University of California/San Diego
Roger Gosden, PhD, McGill University (Canada)
Gail Greendale, MD, University of California/Los Angeles
Sioban Harlow, PhD, University of Michigan
Kay Johannes, PhD, New England Research Institutes
Nancy Klein, MD, University of Washington
Bill Lasley, PhD, University of California/Davis
James Liu, MD, University of Cincinnati
Ellen Mitchell, RN, PhD, University of Washington
Kathleen O'Connor, PhD, University of Washington
Mary Lake Polan, MD, PhD, Stanford University
Jerilynn Prior, MD, University of British Columbia (Canada)
John Randolph Jr, MD, University of Michigan
Nancy Reame, RN, PhD, University of Michigan
Richard T. Scott, MD, Reproductive Medicine Associates of NJ
Gerson Weiss, MD, New Jersey Medical School

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