



## Being "Dolly Doctor"

Melissa S-L Kang

When I was asked to take on writing for *Dolly* magazine's "Dolly Doctor" column in 1993 I was more excited than if I'd won a *Dolly* total hair, body and personality makeover at age 13. This was a unique opportunity, which would not come along very often, to enter part of an adolescent's world on her terms.

The first question asked of me by anyone (including teenagers) about Dolly Doctor is, "Are the questions made up?" The answer is a resounding "No!". In 1993, the magazine received 1000 letters a year to its health and sex columns. Today, it receives 1000 emails every 3 weeks, and the occasional mailed letter.

And it keeps growing. A few years ago, the magazine expanded its health section, calling the whole segment Dolly Doctor, rather than just the one-page medical column. There is now a psychologist who answers questions about mental health issues, relationships and feelings. There are feature articles as well as personal stories, and earlier this year I began answering boys' questions as well.

Being a Dolly Doctor hasn't always been easy. Sometimes I just don't know the answer. For example, what is the green ointment that's supposed to remove moles but instead caused a scar after 2 weeks and "didn't work much"? Or, could the 3 cm piece of long dangly skin hanging from the vulva actually be a Bartholin's gland, and if not, then what is it? Perhaps all this terminology is just too confusing. It's clear that too much information can also mix health messages, such as the letter from the girl who "can't stop masturbating" and is terrified because she doesn't want to have a Pap smear yet. And what do I say to a 13-year-old whose best friend and she share the same crush, but one has taken the trouble to write and ask for advice about torn loyalties while the other has doubtless just "gone in for the kill"?

Maternal responsibilities and Dolly Doctor have also caused consternation. I wouldn't allow my children to read the magazine when they were prepubertal, but they were permitted to tear out wall posters to decorate their bedrooms (does anyone else remember "Hanson"?). One day my then 8-year-old son, playing at a friend's house, told the mother that he'd like a "condom on his sandwich please". In Year 4, he started a "sex club" at school, a fact I discovered when the mother of another boy approached me in the playground to express her concern about the pernicious effect my work was having on my family. (I should add that being in the sex club involved walking around saying "we're in the sex club" and nothing more.) This same son (now 16) and my 15-year-old daughter seem to know the answers to all the questions I receive, and more besides. My daughter recently laughed at my ignorance of a (supposedly) common word used to describe a particular phallic shape. Only after she explained this to me was I able to answer the question correctly. All makes for interesting dinnertime conversation too.



The number of *Dolly* magazines lining my bookshelves outnumber my peer reviewed journals by about 10 to 1. So, as much as Dolly Doctor was my guide to life, as it has been for many teenagers since the magazine started in 1970, it now helps to guide my life as an adolescent-health professional. For every "desperate" teenager writing to Dolly Doctor each month, for every straightforward or heart-wrenching, amusing, bizarre or even downright ridiculous question that comes my way, there is some poignant reminder of what is so wonderful about adolescents.

(Received 25 Jul 2005, accepted 28 Jul 2005)

□

Department of General Practice, University of Sydney at Westmead Hospital, Sydney, NSW.

Melissa S-L Kang, MBBS, MCH, Lecturer.

Correspondence: Dr Melissa S-L Kang, Department of General Practice, University of Sydney at Westmead Hospital, Westmead, NSW 2145.

m kang@med.usyd.edu.au