ESTABLISHING A ‘NEW NORMAL’
A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF WOMEN’S BODY IMAGE AFTER MASTECTOMY

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BACKGROUND
Increasing rates of breast reconstruction have been described after unilateral (UM) and contralateral prophylactic mastectomy (CPM), however not all women who undergo mastectomy undergo reconstruction. This study explored women’s experiences after UM+CPM and their decision to undergo reconstruction.

AIMS
- To describe women’s experiences around body image after reconstructing
- To explore the choice for and the meaning that reconstruction holds for women who have undergone mastectomy

QUALITATIVE METHODS
- Qualitative study using grounded theory methodology describing the decision-making process of women with early-stage breast cancer undergoing UM+CPM with or without reconstruction
- Purposive sampling identified women from 5 hospitals across the Greater Toronto Area (Ontario, Canada) who were suitable candidates for lumpectomy but underwent UM+CPM
- Participants varied in their age, ethnicity, location of treatment (academic or community), and extent of surgery
- Semi-structured one-on-one in-person interviews conducted by a single interviewer
- On-going inductive analysis of data to guide sampling and data collection
- Interviews continued until data saturation was reached
- Key concepts/themes were identified independently by multiple coders using constant comparative analysis

RESULTS

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Demonstrative Quotes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-mastectomy Body</td>
<td>Definition of feminine and ‘woman’ is linked to breasts within society</td>
<td>“With the loss of breasts women are defined as abnormal and if” (Participant 1)</td>
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<td>Undergoing Mastectomy (UM+CPM)</td>
<td>Women described ‘loss’ and ‘disfigurement’ after undergoing either unilateral or bilateral mastectomy irrespective of whether they had immediate reconstruction</td>
<td>“You know you’re going to look like a child (a person with no breast). It’s disgusting. You’re concoaved” (Participant 25)</td>
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<td>Reasons for Reconstruction &amp; Role of Reconstruction</td>
<td>Reasons for choosing reconstruction included: to ‘become almost normal’</td>
<td>“They say that you are going to go along with, a peg leg or something, like you’re missing something” (Participant 14)</td>
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<td>Reasons for Not Undergoing Reconstruction</td>
<td>Reasons for not choosing reconstruction included: not desiring further surgery</td>
<td>“I looked completely normal. I felt normal. No one will ever know that I had a mastectomy because I had these perfectly symmetrical breasts that look exactly the same.” (Participant 5)</td>
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<td>Post-Mastectomy Body</td>
<td>Most women experienced ongoing body-image concerns regardless of whether they had reconstruction</td>
<td>“I’m just going to wait. I would give myself some time to get over what happened” (Participant 20)</td>
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<td>Concerns were minimized by ‘camouflaging’ with clothing</td>
<td>“I’m not going to do for breast reconstruction because I was perfectly comfortable with the whole concept of a prosthetic” (Participant 23)</td>
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DISCUSSION
- Women personally expressed and felt that society defined being feminine and normal as having two breasts
- Undergoing unilateral or bilateral mastectomy left women as abnormal
- Women attempted to establish a ‘new normal’ either by undergoing reconstruction or using prostheses
- Women who chose reconstruction did so as it allowed them to have desired symmetry and cosmesis
- Many women who did not choose reconstruction as they wanted to ‘move on’ from their cancer and did not want further surgery
- All women (whether women they had reconstruction or not) expressed some degree of ongoing concerns about their body image which they attempted to improve upon with clothing
- Concerns around body image and pain/changes in skin sensation were common
- No woman regretted her decision around reconstruction
- Only those women awaiting delayed reconstruction were dissatisfied

CONCLUSION
Women who chose undergone mastectomy described ‘establishing a new normal’ after their surgery. Regardless of whether women underwent reconstruction or not, all women experienced some degree of self-consciousness.

“I’m going to be beautiful. I’m just going be normal again. I wanted to be normal.” (Participant 2)

“With the clothes on, fine. But nobody sees the other side at the end of the day when you take off your mask.” (Participant 12)