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Anvar Ali Khan reviews *Sex is Not a Four-letter Word*

I remember, very clearly, the day when I first learned about sex.

I was 11 years old, sitting on the bench in the gymnastics class awaiting my turn on the parallel bars, when my friend Daljeet, sitting on my left, leaned over and whispered into my ear, "Do you know how babies are made?" I shook my head. Daljeet leaned over again and enlightened me, in very basic but vivid terms. Then he whispered, "Pass it on."

I, in turn, leaned over to the little boy on my right and whispered into his ear, "Do you know how babies are made?" and proceeded to dutifully enlighten him, adding, "Pass it on."

Thus, by the end of that gym class, all 30 of us children had been educated. More or less.

Dr Sudhakar Krishnamurthi's thesis seems to be that most of us never really go beyond this basic level in our sexual education. All that we know about sex is from our own limited personal experience and hearsay. Few of us have read any serious books on sexual matters (sometimes nothing more than pornography). And, most important, despite our ignorance, we think we know it all, a dangerous mindset in today's increasingly complicated sexual world.

Which is why Dr Krishnamurthi decided to do something about it.

Now, some of the best story-tellers I have known are doctors. It's what one might call the "A J Cronin syndrome". Scratch them a little and, like the admirable Dr Cronin, they will come up with a fund of riveting stories drawn from their unique front-row seats in the theatre of human drama: stories that fascinate you, intrigue you, move you to tears, set you giggling or sitting on the very edge of your chair, as in a Hitchcock movie. Very few other professions, if you think about it, can give you such a rich lode of emotive raw material waiting to be turned into reading matter, factual or fictionalized.

If that is so of doctors in general, imagine how it relates to someone like Dr Sudhakar Krishnamurthi. He is an internationally known andrologist and microsurgeon, a WHO expert on sexual medicine, the founder of India's first andrology center, and the only Asian to have won the Herbert Newman Award for his "Krishnamurthi Operation" for treating Peyronie's

disease. He is thus a man who has spent a quarter of a century inside the bedrooms (so to speak) of the rich and the poor, the straight and the kinky, the old and the young.

As he himself puts it, "One of the nicest fringe benefits of having selected the sub-specialty of andrology as a career is that it makes for great party talk. You see, sex is everybody's favourite subject." And he puts to good use all the inside stories and anecdotes he has collected over 25 years of practice in sexual medicine.

Sex is Not a Four-Letter Word is a collection of anecdotes on sex, written in a cheerful, chatty, yet informative style. As if a knowledgeable friend of yours had placed his arm around your shoulder and said, "Oye, gal sun yaar...." And proceeded to tell you everything you wanted/needed to know about sex, aspect by aspect, chapter by chapter.

The book covers a variety of useful topics: from erectile dysfunction to libido mismatches between partners, from male menopause to ejaculatory disturbances, from vasectomy to the need for responsible sexual behaviour, from trans-sexuality to penis transplants. **The matter is crisp, informative, and to-the-point, with each chapter culminating in a neatly-boxed "Take-home message" that summarizes the relevant learning.** Should you want more information on the subject, the author provides you with a url so that you can surf the Net for more. **The style is informal, reader-friendly, and buddy-buddy,** as you can tell from the titles of the chapters: "Mr Maggi Noodle", "Fallacies about Phalluses", "The Reincarnation of Proud Peter", "Not Sohail, I'm Sohaila", "Men Oh Pause", and the like.

There is a wealth of information in the book, useful or fascinating, or both. Such as the fact that 80 per cent of erectile dysfunction is caused by physical, organic reasons, not psychological, and can therefore be medically treated! And that in male menopause, as in most things in life, prevention is better than cure; and timely, pre-emptive steps can facilitate a smooth transition for a man as he grows older.

There are other facts: that chocolate – which contains chemicals called methylxanthines – is a sex-enhancing food. And that there's a close correlation between coronary heart disease and erectile dysfunction (if you have the one, you may be at risk of developing the other). That long-term bicycle riding can, beware, lead to erectile dysfunction! And that, research shows that, in the age group of 80-100 years, 63 per cent of men and 30 per cent of women continue to have sex. (No wonder, then, that the author has devoted a chapter to "Horny Healthy Oldies"!)

The heavy-duty credentials of the author, and, of course, the snappy, conversational style in which he delivers his wisdom, dotted with puns and one-liners, makes this book interesting. It's like bumping serendipitously into an expert in sexual medicine at a party, and, over many beers, having him explain to you everything you never knew about sex.