Hang on, here we go.
Penis Captivus: Is it real?

This happened in Chicago when I was growing up. This couple were both married to other people when they met at work. It did not take long for him to suggest lunch and it was there that she offered him a tryst. For about four months, they met once or twice a week. Sex was always passionate, intense, and quick, and they usually did it twice. As soon as they met, they tore their clothes off and went at it. Then, later, they said good-bye, again, with interest and awareness neither one knew at home. Then disaster struck. After his orgasm, hers contracted around his penis, bringing it again to erection. She could feel his hardness and it excited her to another spontaneous orgasm. As the walls of her vagina contracted even tighter, his penis swelled in response to her spasms. And the cycle ran once more. Again they both groaned with pleasures that bordered on pain. Laying there, exhausted, time ceased. When they attempted to part, they found that they could not. They were stuck. He could not even move within her without pain to both of them. She, too, was unable to unlatch her clutch and could not pull away. They tried rolling over, laying sideways, nothing worked. After an hour, it was clearly hopeless. They were able to reach the phone, call the front desk, and request that a doctor be let into the room. The doctor was puzzled, never having seen such a case, but he arranged for an ambulance. The EMTs put the couple on a carrier and took them to an emergency room. There, doctors tried combinations of local anesthetics and medicating douches. Finally, they had no choice but to give them both a general anesthetic and wait for the results, which, ultimately were successful. Both partners experienced great pain and some trauma, especially as the incident was their undoing at home.

… or so it was said…

In fact, penis captivus is an urban legend, a myth. Even so, it still elicits claims of authenticity from medical professionals and others. The story about the story is summarized on Snopes, the myth-busting website that debunks urban legends. Go to www.snopes.com and enter “penis captivus” in the search box. You can also find it in Wikipedia. Those summaries cite an article in the British Medical Journal, “Penis captivus: did it occur?” by Dr. F. Kräupl Taylor (Volume 2, Number 6196; 20 October, 1979, pp 977-978).

Dr. F. Kräupl Taylor’s paper admits the legendary nature of the reports, but insists that some are real. “The symptom of penis captivus during sexual intercourse has had a largely hearsay existence in medical history, and rumour has embellished the drama of its occurrence. It is not entirely mythical, however. It seems to have been a symptom of great rarity in former times and to have vanished perhaps completely in this century.” His own reports actually do include cases in the 20th century, as do the letters that followed. So, the affliction is still with us, waiting only for new announcements in the new millennium.

Dr. F. Kräupl Taylor’s paper does offer nine references, but the narrative text reveals most of them to be twice-told tales, not actual first-hand experiences of medical
professionals: “The latest report of the symptom, found by Rolleston, was published by Piltz. … A few years ago a remarkable case of this kind occurred in Bremen. … [Stoeckel] probably only repeats hearsay information; he would certainly have mentioned it if he had personally dealt with patients.” And so on. Moreover, one of the citations in Kräupl Taylor’s review turns out to have been a complete fabrication. Both Wikipedia and Snopes cite the hoax.

That article generated a slew of replies from all over the English medical community. The second letter below, from Richard Roberts of Ottawa, explains how the story began as a spoof. At that point, the editor attempted to close discussion, but then was forced to reopen it for evidentiary proof that the condition is real (maybe).


**Penis captivus**

Sir, The fascinating review by Dr F Kräupl Taylor (20 October, p 977) on the emotive subject of penis captivus deserves to be followed by a spate of anecdotal correspondence. Perhaps I might make a small contribution. While serving with the RAMG in the Gold Coast in 1941 I became aware of an African publication known as the Ashanti Pioneer. I cannot recall whether it was published daily or weekly but its content had a Rabelaisian flavour that endeared it to some of the European expatriots. I was shown a paragraph cut from the paper and carefully preserved by its delighted owner. It described a case of penis captivus with a wealth of detail, including the name of the remote village where the affair took place and the difficulty in hoisting the embarrassed couple on to a lorry for 30 miles of bumpy transport to the nearest government medical officer. His use of chloroform for the woman resolved the situation. It is, of course, possible that the episode was a journalistic fabrication but the naming of the village and of the doctor concerned made me feel at the time that the event had indeed taken place. It is probable that others of your readers who have worked overseas will be able to add other cases to the few records collected by Dr Taylor.

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**Penis captivus**

Sir, I was much interested in the review “Penis captivus - did it occur?” by Dr F Kräupl Taylor (20 October, p 977). I have no idea whether this exotic condition ever occurs. However, one of the references cited - indirectly - by Dr Kräupl Taylor is fictitious - or rather the reference is valid but a completely fictitious incident is recorded. Dr Kräupl Taylor quotes Kisch, who had quoted a Dr Davis. This is, of course, the notorious Dr Egerton Yorrick Davis, an imaginary doctor invented by Sir William Osier in his Montreal years. The younger Osier was much addicted to practical jokes of a literary sort and he used the pseudonym of Egerton Y Davis to record some quite outrageous and entirely fictional medical happenings. I am indebted to Dr Edward Bensley, professor
emeritus of the history of medicine, McGill University, for confirming my suspicions and for providing the references I give below.

Richard Roberts
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, KIH 5W2

1 Davis, E Y, Medical News (Philadelphia), 13 December 1884, 45, 673.

*This correspondence is now closed – Ed. BMJ.


**Penis captivus has occurred**

Sir,

In reply to Dr F Kräupl Taylor's article on penis captivus (20 October, p 977), which was recently brought to my attention, there can be no doubt but that I have seen a case of this seemingly rare condition. The year was 1947 and the case occurred when I was a houseman at the Royal Isle of Wight County Hospital. I can distinctly remember the ambulance drawing up and two young people, a honeymoon couple I believe, being carried on a single stretcher into the casualty department. An anaesthetic was given to the female and they were discharged later the same morning. In view of the number of letters that have recently been written on this subject I rang my old friend Dr S W Wolfe, who is now in general practice in Bridgwater, and who was the other houseman at the hospital at the time. He confirmed my story, his exact words being, “I remember it well.”

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*Although the correspondence on this subject was closed we are making an exception for this one letter as it reports personal experience of a case.-Ed, BMJ.*

Be all of that as it may, even that letter bears the hallmarks of an urban legend. The author remembered the year, but not the season, month, day or time of such an unusual event. Although a “personal” account, the doctor did not actually treat the couple, but only saw them brought in. He surmised or assumed that they are a “honeymoon couple.” He was not present at the anesthetization. He was only an intern or junior staff doctor (“houseman”), and not a resident or attending physician. In other words, he was at the periphery of the event, not its center.

Whether *penis captivus* is real or not, its very name is in some doubt. The BMJ calls it “penis captiva.” Certainly, the British get enough Latin and Greek in school. The matter is obvious to anyone who knows Spanish, French, German or another language with gender. In English, *the* man and *the* woman carry the same article “*the*.” However, in Spanish is *el* hombre and *la* mujer. In German, it is *der* Mann and *die* Frau. In Latin, while you can refer to a woman as *captiva*, the noun *captivus* applies to all prisoners of war, regardless of gender—and (no surprise) the gender for *penis* in Latin is masculine: *captivus*. Fortunately, our search engines suffer no gender conflicts; and however you look for it, you can find plenty to read.