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■ **NOCIRC OF MICHIGAN** ■

# **INFORMANT**

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INFORMING MICHIGAN ON THE HARM OF CIRCUMCISION

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## **My Second Circumcision**

### **A Trip to the Mohel**

by *Norm Cohen*

The *Mohel* had a gentle and reassuring voice over the phone. Posing as an expectant and curious father, I told him I wanted to attend a *bris* (Jewish circumcision) before I decided on one for my own son.

The *Mohel* (Jewish circumciser) proudly told me he performs 350 *brisis* a year. His fee is \$250 each, which amounts to a salary of \$87,500 a year. He has to advertise in the local papers, he explained, because 50% of his clients don't belong to a Jewish congregation. He sent me his brochure, which included the shocking statement: "No one in modern times questions the desirability of circumcision."

A few weeks later, I got "my" *bris* date. He found a family that would have me as a guest in their home the following day.

When I got there, the caterers were setting up. A crowd was gathering in the backyard. I did my best to look like I belonged there, but I was nervous. "What am I doing here?" I asked myself.

Although I am the son of a rabbi, I had never been to a *bris*, other than my own. While many Jews told me the baby screamed, some had reported little reaction at all. I knew I had to see for myself, so I created this real-life adventure.

A boy's *bris* is an important celebration. Family from all over the country had flown in. All of the grandparents were in attendance, as well as aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins, family friends and coworkers. There were children and teenagers there, too. We all waited in the backyard on a hot summer's day in the middle of the week, around lunch time.

One relative said casually to some others, "The baby won't be very happy in an

hour." This initiated a discussion about circumcision pain, which I was delighted to hear. "Of course it's painful," said another. Then a woman mentioned she heard Dr. Dean Edell on the radio opposing circumcision. I wanted to jump right out of my emotional disguise and give this stranger a big hug. Instead, I nodded solemnly.

They all agreed the pending *bris* would be painful, but no one seemed concerned about it. Then, as if to trivialize the circumcision, someone made a joke about John Bobbitt and his severed penis.

Meanwhile, the *Mohel* was setting up shop in the master bedroom. He was dressed in a blue smock that made him look like a pharmacist. I wandered in. The mother and father were there. Everyone was nervous and trying to look busy.

*continued on page 4* ⇒

#### DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

We are fortunate to live among a great festival of diversity, discussion and dissent. We are free to select and to serve at the Grand Buffet of beliefs, practices, and rituals, and to flavor them to our taste. Therefore, it need not surprise nor frighten anyone that religious circumcision is being questioned and challenged from both inside and outside the religious communities that practice it.

The rights of children to physical integrity, self-determination and security of person can be freely championed by anyone without apology. Our own success at securing these rights depends on challenging religious circumcision in ways that do not degrade the communities that practice it. Universal rights know no border *and* no hatred.

*On behalf of all the children, thanks!*

*Norm Cohen, Director*

#### CONTENTS

<b>My Second Circumcision</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Director's Message</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The Birth of a Movement</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Mission Statement</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Local News</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>NOCIRC Exhibit Dates</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Bad Ideas from Medicine</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Become An Informant!</b>	<b>4</b>

# The Birth of a Movement

## A Michigan Pioneer Remembers

by James Whipple, MD, Ph.D.

In 1970 the word "circumcision" was rarely mentioned in public and only incorrectly in the medical literature. My involvement began with a long emotional journey dealing with my status as an intact male surrounded by those who were circumcised.

Professionally, my activism began in 1972. As a doctor, I was asked by a nurse giving Lamaze classes at Beaumont Hospital, in Royal Oak, Michigan, to speak to her class about circumcision. There was no source for parents to get information. Hospital personnel took a completely uncooperative attitude with parents who questioned the surgery. Parents were not allowed to witness the operation. There were no visual aids to employ during a discussion of the topic. The press would simply not cover it.

My first presentation depended solely on drawings I sketched on a portable blackboard, followed by a question and answer session. The next year I had a set of slides showing a circumcision performed with a Gomco clamp. This was the first opportunity to show parents exactly what went on in the Circ Room. I could now show a parenting class what a boy went through.

After two and a half years of classes, one parent complained to the hospital administration. I and my Lamaze instructor were told to offer our circumcision presentation outside the hospital.

In 1975 the American Academy of Pediatrics issued their famous report stating there was no medical reason to perform infant circumcisions. Three years later, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists endorsed the AAP's position.

During the 1970's a grassroots resistance to routine infant circumcision began. Jeffrey R. Wood began the INTACT Educational Foundation in 1976. I corresponded with him, as well as with Rosemary Romberg, Roger Saquet, Jim Peron, David McKnight, John Erickson,

Tony Lesce and other activists around the country.

Mark Waring studied and distributed information on the first scientific expansion techniques to elongate the remnants of skin left after a circumcision.

In the 1980's, some accurate books on circumcision were finally published. Edward Wallerstein's definitive work, *Circumcision: An American Health Fallacy*, was published in 1980. This was the first comprehensive medical and social discussion of the surgery.

In October 1981, the first national television airing of a circumcision documentary was presented on David Brinkley's *NBC Magazine* and reported by Douglas Kiker. Childbirth educator Rosemary Romberg created materials for presentation to parents and published *Circumcision: The Painful Dilemma* in 1985.

Marilyn Milos, a registered nurse, entered the fight and lost her position because she counseled parents against routine circumcision. She began NOCIRC in 1986 and was interviewed on the *Phil Donahue Show*.

A medical establishment backlash began in earnest. A concerted effort was made in many southeastern Michigan hospitals to minimize discussion of circumcision with parents.

Mothers were pressured to sign the consent form while in labor or immediately after. In some cases, the consent form was actually signed after the surgery was done!

Most physicians and their hospitals used both overt and covert means to make sure that no professional or outsider discouraged circumcision. I was denied permission to distribute pamphlets.

It became evident to me that comprehensive medical insurance coverage and easy income by the Metro area medical establishment were the prime reasons they defended the procedure. I faced a lot of negative feedback. The same old misinformation was accepted as truth

and the same blind adherence to tradition was evident.

I continued to present circumcision workshops to a variety of men's groups in the Detroit area and to groups in the Eastern and Western states.

By 1990, I was completely burnt out. Fortunately, a more diverse group of individuals became involved from a variety of social, ethnic and religious backgrounds. This gave the movement a broader context in which to work.

Looking back, my most rewarding experiences have been discussing circumcision with men who feel violated, helping them work on their anger and advising them on restoration. I have witnessed the beginnings of an open discussion of a once taboo subject. Increased activism, more books and documentaries have helped to end the "conspiracy of silence" that once surrounded circumcision.

Someday, with continued activism from those who understand that cutting off a sexual body part is wrong, the future will allow all males to be left intact.

*James Whipple is a retired medical physician who currently is active in HIV/AIDS issues in metropolitan Detroit. He serves on NOCIRC's Professional Advisory Board.*

**The Informant** (ISSN 1092-020X) is the quarterly newsletter of **NOCIRC of Michigan**. It is a bridge builder to our supporters and members in Michigan. It represents our commitment to **NOCIRC** supporters to provide quarterly information on **NOCIRC** activism in this state and to activists everywhere. Articles, comments and questions are always welcome.

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## NOCIRC OF MICHIGAN

**NOCIRC of Michigan** is a consumer rights advocacy group helping parents understand that circumcision is harmful to their children.

We educate mothers, fathers and health care providers in Michigan about the harm of circumcision and about proper intact care. We protect consumers from false medical claims. We actively promote the benefits of normal genitalia.

We are a non-profit group consisting of health care professionals and dedicated lay people. We are committed to effective education, advocacy and activism on behalf of children to protect them from harm. We are part of a worldwide organization dedicated to ending all forms of male and female genital mutilation.

### LOCAL NEWS

#### Sponsors Needed

Would you like to help get *The Informant* out? Then please consider sponsoring an issue. Sponsors cover the costs of printing and mailing our newsletter. We reach *eight hundred* interested readers. As a sponsor, we'll also print your ad.

Please call (810) 642-5703 to help.

#### Restoration Support Group Now Meeting

A monthly support group meets once a month in metropolitan Detroit for men seeking moral and technical support in foreskin restoration.

Interested men, please call (810) 642-5703 for more information.

### *Whose Body, Whose Rights?* Debut

*Whose Body, Whose Rights?* and *It's A Boy!* debuted in Michigan last October at the Troy Marriott Hotel. These landmark documentaries examine the ethics, human rights and religious issues surrounding routine infant circumcision. A highly interested crowd watched the presentation and a discussion followed.

Coincidentally, *It's A Boy!* also aired the same week on TVOntario, an educational television network based in Ontario. It was viewed by subscribers across Canada.

*Whose Body, Whose Rights?* was also seen last November on cable television stations in Grand Rapids and at Western Michigan University.

#### Videos for Sale

NOCIRC of Michigan *Informants* who missed our presentation may purchase *Whose Body, Whose Rights?* at a special price of \$25 (regularly \$35).

This video is an excellent educational tool for presentation to classes or groups and for loaning to expectant parents.

## NOCIRC of Michigan Exhibit Dates

Volunteers are needed to help staff NOCIRC information tables at the exhibitions listed below. Come and enjoy sharing our message with others! Please call (810) 642-5703 to volunteer.

#### ♦ March

*Inner Life Health and Self-Enhancement Expo*

Dearborn Civic Center,  
Dearborn, MI

11:00 am to 7:00 pm

#### ♦ May

*Babies-To-Be Show*

Northfield Hilton Hotel,  
Troy, MI

12:30 to 3:30 pm

#### Baby Faces Wanted

Send us a picture of your intact baby boy. We'll print his darling face in an upcoming issue! Please enclose a letter about your decision to keep him intact.

#### *NOCIRC of Michigan*

PO Box 333, Birmingham, MI 48012

Pam Maturo and Patrick Draper staffing the NOCIRC information booth on Liberty Street in Ann Arbor, during last summer's art fair

# My Second Circumcision

*continued from page 1*

Little David's legs were already strapped to a *Circumstraint* board. His arms were left unrestrained. The board was placed on a satin pillow and then draped with towels, hiding the board's four Velcro restraints. The final arrangement resembled a soft little bed.

The Mohel uncovered David. He gave the baby a wine-soaked gauze to suck. The Mohel then sprayed the baby's penis with a topical anesthetic. The Mohel looked nervous, sensing the presence of others. He glanced around and said, to no one in particular, "People usually don't watch this part."

He worked quickly, using his steel probe to tear the foreskin away from David's glans. The baby started crying. The foreskin separated without much struggle. "Now we're ready," the Mohel said.

Everyone was called into the bedroom. I stayed by the Mohel's side, but hoped no one would mistake me for his assistant. If I had wanted to run out in disgust, it would have been quite impossible now. The room was packed and I was surrounded.

The ceremony was informal. The Mohel explained its purpose. He reassured us that he would tell us the part we didn't have to watch. He led us in a few prayers, mostly in English, and we sang a few songs. I joined in. The father and grandfather recited some prayers.

"Now's the time you don't have to watch," the Mohel said. With scissors, he made a lengthwise cut along the top of the foreskin. David screamed. He waved his arms as if to motion the Mohel away. The Mohel worked

swiftly with his back to the audience, blocking what he was doing to David.

The Mohel spoke gently to the baby, trying to calm him down. He applied the *Mogen* clamp. David let out panting screams. His screams were loud, but never shattering. With one quick scrape of a knife, he sliced David's protruding foreskin right off. It balled up on the clamp like a lump of clay.

The Mohel was obviously aware of David's pain and had anticipated it. This was evident in the Mohel's face and in what he said to calm the baby. I noticed the Mohel's concern about what the crowd would perceive. He was clearly nervous. The Mohel was careful to hide the severed foreskin in a gauze and to keep all his instruments covered with paper towels.

When the clamp was finally removed, the remaining flesh stayed crushed together like a pinched hose. David continued sobbing. The Mohel pushed on the wound and exposed the glans of David's penis. It was now deep red. He quickly covered the wound with a bandage, wrapping up the raw, bloody glans.

Finally, David was freed. He stopped crying when he was picked up. The Mohel was eager to point this out to everyone. Twice he repeated, "That's why the baby was crying—because his legs were strapped down." The crowd laughed nervously in disbelief.

The mother, who had disappeared during the procedure, now gave her baby a bottle to suck. David was silent again.

The Mohel had played several roles: religious leader, surgeon, master of ceremonies and public relations specialist. He did his

best to calm the baby *and* the crowd. Throughout the surgery, the Mohel kept talking, inserting jokes to lighten the mood. He was adept at hiding and finessing the actual circumcision. Only someone watching very closely could actually see what was going on. Without an understanding of normal genital anatomy, such an observer would not appreciate the trauma David had just experienced.

The guests filed out to the backyard for the catered lunch. The Mohel returned to the room to instruct the mother in "after care". He arranged for a follow-up visit two days later, to check for infection. The parents received a "Certificate of Ritual Circumcision". The mother dressed her son in a blue T-shirt, a gift from the Mohel, which read, "*I'm Perfect . . . Now* ☆".

When we got back outside, there were lots of sandwiches, wine and desert waiting for us. I wasn't hungry. The Mohel shook my hand and introduced me to the father. "My first son cried a lot more," the father told me, as if relieved. The Mohel went on, "Some babies are real bad. Sometimes they really work themselves up. This one was about as good as it gets."

I was ready to leave. My check-up with the Mohel was finished. Circumcision had become more real for me, but not more understandable. My hope now is that David will grow up and become aware of his natural anger at what I witnessed that afternoon and thus choose to leave his own boys intact.

Two weeks later the Mohel left me a message. He wanted to know when he could set things up for my "son". If he only knew.

## BAD IDEAS FROM THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE

### Real Quotes from Real Doctors

*"I refer to masturbation as one of the effects of a long foreskin; not that this vice is entirely absent in those who have undergone circumcision, though I never saw an instance in a Jewish child of very tender years, except as the result of association with children whose covered glans have naturally impelled them to the habit."*

Dr. M.J. Moses, M.D., *The Value of Circumcision as a Hygienic and Therapeutic Measure*, New York Medical Journal, 1871 Vol. 14-4 p. 368-374

## TELL THE TRUTH ABOUT CIRCUMCISION

### Become An Informant

A *tax-deductible* membership fee of \$25 or more makes you a NOCIRC of Michigan **Informant**. Help us to educate parents!

**PO Box 333, Birmingham, MI 48012**

NAME:

ADDRESS:

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