
■ NOCIRC OF MICHIGAN ■

INFORMANT

PREVENTING INFANT CIRCUMCISION — FOR THE WELL-BEING OF ALL

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The Case Against Religious Circumcision Part One: Freedom of Religion?

by Norm Cohen

In April, a family court judge ruled that a four-year-old Michigan boy cannot be given sacramental peyote at American Indian religious ceremonies.

In his decision, Judge Graydon Dimkoff of Newaygo County Family Court wrote, "Peyote is dangerous, and in general, should be avoided." He went on to say that the boy could ingest peyote when he was fully aware of the implications, was physically and emotionally ready, and had the permission of both parents. The federal government has allowed its use in Indian churches.

The boy's father, Jonathan Fowler, a member of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians in Traverse City, Michigan, attends the Native American Church of the Morning Star where peyote is ingested as a sacrament. Peyote contains the hallucinogen drug mescaline and is classified by the US criminal code as a controlled substance.

Martin Holmes, a Michigan attorney representing the boy's mother, Kristin Hanslovsky, characterized the case as a child protection issue.

Peyote has been a part of Native American culture for thousands of years. Those who ingest the plant believe it provides enlightenment and other spiritual and physical benefits.

This, of course, brings us to the problem of religious circumcision.

Arguing the case against religious circumcision is a problematic one from the start. We as a society believe that it is wrong to publicly criticize another person's religious beliefs or practices. In a country where the dominant religion is Christianity, any practice originating out of the Judeo-Christian tradition is even more protected from public criticism.

We pride ourselves today on being a tolerant, diverse society. There are many who

monitor their opinions in favor of political correctness, cultural relativism, and even moral ambiguity. Absolutism that opposes another person's religious practice is viewed as intolerant, confrontational, and potentially dangerous.

Many who support the good work of NOCIRC in ending circumcision are nevertheless reluctant to speak out against religious circumcision. Its ancient history causes some to view the ritual practice as an exotic monolith that can never be touched. They feel powerless to change it.

Some remain silent out of a deep sense of collective shame. The history of anti-Semitism and Jewish persecution give people further reasons not to criticize a Jewish ritual. There is a strong, unspoken fear by many of being branded an anti-Semite. This fear is used by proponents of circumcision to stifle legitimate debate about it.

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DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Advocates for children should be advocates opposed to routine infant circumcision. Unlike some other issues, there is no moral, middle-of-the-road position on circumcision that can be taken by those who advocate and work for the best interests of all children.

Sadly, many in the mainstream child advocacy field have failed to comprehend the significance of circumcision as an abuse of children, even while they stress the importance of positive experiences in the first year of life.

Supporters of NOCIRC must reach out and inform child

advocates everywhere of our efforts in order to help them understand the broader significance of our work to their own.

Those who consider themselves progressives on child rights' issues often do not like to hear they are mistaken because they ignore the harm of circumcision, excuse it as a parent's right, or call us "too controversial." Their mistakes of judgement should not be left unchallenged inside the child advocacy community. There are boys coming soon that are counting on us!

*On behalf of all the children, thanks!
Norm Cohen, Director*

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Anti-circumcision activists who speak out today against religious circumcision are working to end *all* infant circumcisions. It takes a paranoid logic to claim that caring about the welfare of baby boys is anti-Semitic.

Not arguing against religious circumcision is also problematic. Is it possible for boys born of Jewish parents to have fewer human rights than other babies? It could be argued that making no attempt to protect these boys is itself anti-Semitic.

If circumcision is in fact harmful, then wouldn't we be hypocritical if we did not condemn it, even as a religious ritual? Wouldn't we be ignoring the real suffering of, and damage to, Jewish and Muslim boys subjected to the ritual who may one day grow up, as I did, to resent it?

The silence of child advocates hoping to avoid offending some people contributes to the denial that allows the practice to continue.

Proponents of the ritual defend circumcision on the grounds of religious freedom. Ironically, it is only the parents' religious freedom they wish to protect. What about the religious freedom of the boy? They completely ignore the boy's ultimate right to choose his own religious practices, and with them, the markings he will have on his body.

Personal autonomy is the cornerstone of modern American life. People are supposedly free to make their own choices. More than ever before, children can be different from their parents. It is quite plausible that a circumcised Jewish boy may one day grow up to reject circumcision for his own son.

The Sikh religion and others regard the human body as very sacred and condemn all efforts to modify it. A boy born to parents that circumcise him may, as an adult, choose a religion that shuns circumcision. This could isolate him from the community of his choice.

The Michigan peyote case illustrates that parents cannot excuse assaults on others, even their own children, by invoking religious freedom. The slightest cutting of a girl's genitals by a well-intentioned religious

community wishing to continue their own ancient traditions has been a felony under US law since 1997, when Congress outlawed female circumcision. The law specifically prohibits religious exemptions to female genital cutting of any degree.

As a religious practice, circumcision is in a class all by itself. No other Western religious ritual demands that cutting occur on someone's body, let alone a child's. Unlike a baptism and all other religious initiation ceremonies, circumcision leaves a permanent and lasting physical affect on a child.

Circumcision became a religious ritual precisely because it is a sacrifice. It strips away and amputates specialized skin and mucous membrane that, in an adult male, would be a sleeve of flesh 3 inches long and 1½ inches in diameter. This flesh, over one-third of the skin of the penis, performs protective and sexual functions for a man that are simply irreplaceable.

The Committee on Bioethics of the American Academy of Pediatrics stated in a 1997 policy statement:

Constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion do not permit children to be harmed through religious practices, nor do they allow religion to be a valid legal defense when an individual harms or neglects a child.

Religious circumcision as practiced by Jews and Muslims is the "token of the covenant between God and Abraham." According to the Hebrew Bible, Abraham agreed to circumcision not just for himself, but for his male children and slaves. However, one cannot agree to give away something that is not theirs. Since infants are incapable of entering into agreements with anyone, the use of force must always be involved.

Few Jews and Muslims actually chose to be circumcised. When supporters of the religious practice speak of their long history of observing circumcision, they forget that it has always been imposed on a child with the blade of a circumciser's knife.

Religious circumcision is an assault because it is forced upon children and is a painful, traumatic, and, by definition, disfiguring surgery.

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MISSION STATEMENT

NOCIRC of MICHIGAN

NOCIRC of Michigan is a non-profit, consumer rights advocacy group that educates people about circumcision and about the benefits of intact genitals.

We inform parents and health care providers in Michigan about the impact of circumcision and about the proper care of intact genitals. We protect consumers from fraudulent medical claims. We promote the benefits of normal genitals and foreskin restoration.

We know the removal of normal, healthy tissue from a child's genitals—in the name of medicine, religion or social custom—results in a loss of sexual function and is a violation of human rights.

We are a group of dedicated consumer activists and health care professionals. We are committed to effective education, advocacy and activism on behalf of children to protect them from harm. We are part of a worldwide movement to end all forms of male and female genital mutilation.

INFORMANT (ISSN 1092-020X) is published three times a year by **NOCIRC of Michigan**. It represents our commitment to provide educational information in this state and to activists everywhere. Articles, comments, and questions are always welcome.

NOCIRC of Michigan Educating a New Generation

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How Would You Like to Prevent 11,000 Circumcisions?

Get the State of Michigan Out of the Free Circumcision Business

Florida has become the 12th state to drop funding for unnecessary circumcisions, as of July 1st, 2003. Meanwhile, the state of Michigan continues to struggle to fund its Medicaid program during its worst budget crisis in forty years.

Eleven thousand newborn baby boys in Michigan would be saved each year from the waste, fraud, and abuse of infant circumcisions by eliminating Medicaid payments for this needless surgery.

If you do nothing else this year to advocate against circumcision, please write to the chairs of the state's appropriations committees and to your own legislators. They need to hear from you if you want to get the state out of the circumcision business!

Ask them to eliminate the waste of unnecessary circumcisions from the Medicaid bud-

get. Tell them that Michigan's Medicaid system should not continue paying for this unnecessary surgery when so many children lack access to basic medical care. Remind them to compare the cost of circumcisions against the cost of delivering a more worthy medical service to the poor. Statewide, about 225,000 children lack health insurance.

Over the last year, six states, Arizona, Florida, Missouri, Montana, North Carolina, and Utah have all dropped funding for unnecessary circumcisions in response to their budget crises.

Routine circumcision cannot stand up to objective financial scrutiny because it does not meet Medicaid's criteria of "medically necessary." As a taxpayer, you should demand that your tax dollars be limited to real medical care.

The state money spent on non-therapeutic circumcisions could be far better utilized for medically justified and cost-effective Medicaid coverage for Michigan's children.

Medicaid parents are the least likely of all socio-economic groups to have access to circumcision information and to be aware that a choice even exists. If Medicaid pays for circumcision, then to them "it must be necessary." As long as Michigan subsidizes this unnecessary surgery, doctors and hospitals have an economic incentive to continue to pressure parents to circumcise. Write to:

Senator Shirley Johnson, Royal Oak
Chair, Senate Appropriations Committee
The Honorable Shirley Johnson
Michigan Senate
PO Box 30036
Lansing, MI 48909-7536

SenSJohnson@senate.michigan.gov
(877) 736-1384 or fax (517) 373-5669

Rep. Marc Shulman, West Bloomfield
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
The Honorable Marc Shulman
Michigan House of Representatives
PO Box 30014
Lansing, MI 48909-7514

mshulman@house.mi.gov
(888) 496-4968 or fax (517) 373-8361

CALENDAR

NOCIRC Exhibit Dates

Volunteers are needed to help staff the NOCIRC information booths at the exhibitions listed below. Come and enjoy sharing our message with others! Training will be provided. Please call (248) 642-5703 to volunteer a couple hours of your time.

◆ **birthNETWORK's**
"Birth and Beyond"

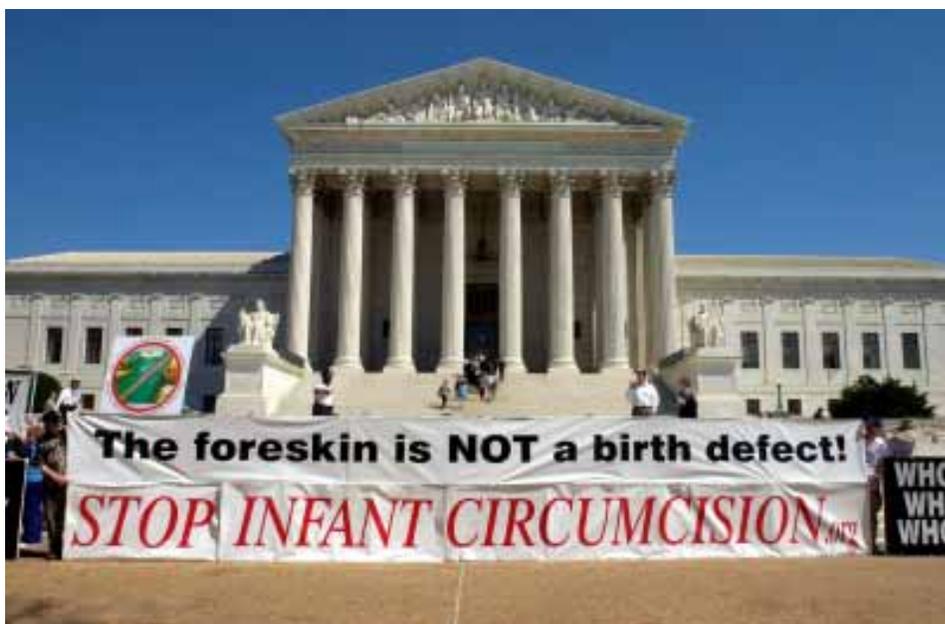
Sun, June 22nd, 2003 1 - 5 pm
Troy Marriott Hotel
I-75 and Big Beaver Rd, Troy, MI

◆ **Ann Arbor Art Fair**

Wed, July 16th - Sat, July 19th, 2003
10 am - 9 pm Wed - Fri
10 am - 6 pm Sat
West Liberty St, Ann Arbor, MI

◆ **Multi-Cultural Health Council's**
"Color Me Healthy"

Fri, July 18th - Sun, July 20th, 2003
Phoenix Center, Pontiac, MI



Demonstrators march in front of the US Supreme Court in Washington DC in April, protesting infant circumcision. *Photo by Chip Feise Location Photography*

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No one claims that an infant undergoing a circumcision is having his own spiritual experience. A baby learns nothing from this assault except that in his world the stronger prevail at will upon the weak, and that his parents are powerless to stop them.

The religious ritual is especially troublesome because it is performed not on a boy's face or his arm, but on his organ of sex and regeneration. In violating his sex organ, his privacy is violated as well, for everyone now knows that he was circumcised, sometimes in front of his family members. Why should so private a part as a penis be held up to so much attention?

The focal point of this ritual deserves closer scrutiny because of the long history and rampant denial of childhood sexual abuse at the hands of clergymen. If a clergyman fondles a baby boy's penis, it is a crime. If he cuts off part of that same boy's penis, it is a religious ritual. It is little wonder that proponents have resorted to defending their ritual as having medical benefits.

Ritual circumcision does have a distinct sexual character, however well-intentioned. The circumciser claims he is "making a man" out of a boy by manipulating his untouched penis to conform with what a penis "should" look like. Like sexual abusers who were abused as children, circumcisers, too, have been abused.

Circumcision destroys all the pleasure that could be generated by the foreskin. The circumciser physically intrudes into the boy's future sex life by altering his body's capacity for pleasure and his experience of sex.

The circumciser's abuse will be forever present during the sex act, in the form of an absent foreskin.

The case against religious circumcision is the same as the case against *all* circumcisions. It is this: *a child has an absolute, universal, inalienable, and non-negotiable right to the intact, unaltered genitals he was born with.* Neither physicians nor ritual circumcisers have the right to alter a boy's penis, as imperfect as they imagine it to be.

The reasons for speaking out against religious circumcision are the same as the reasons for speaking out against any circumcision. The people who speak out against it do so with the same legitimate moral authority and, ultimately, with the same success.

As important as every religion is for its followers, every religion must stop at the flesh of another human being.

In the next issue: "Part 2: A Change in Practice." How a few Jews and a whole lot of American lawsuits will end the practice for good.

Local Mohel Convicted

Samuel Greenbaum was on his way to perform a ritual Jewish circumcision (a *bris*) on an 8-day-old infant when he was arrested in Commerce Township, Michigan on a charge of Operating while Under the Influence of Liquor (OUIL) and a refusal to submit to a preliminary breath test.

He plead guilty last December to a reduced charge of reckless driving and was convicted and sentenced to fines and 1 year probation.

An Oakland County Sheriff's deputy spotted him driving erratically a few blocks away from a home where he was to have conducted the ritual.

Mr. Greenbaum is a Detroit-area Jewish circumciser (a *mohel*) who performs the ritual that surgically removes the foreskin of a baby's penis with a clamp and scalpel on the eighth day after his birth. Mohels are the only surgeons in Michigan that are able to operate without any governmental licensing or regulation.

Special Offer to Members: Join or Renew Now!

New or renewing members to **NOCIRC of Michigan** who contribute \$30 or more are eligible to receive a copy of the 2002 book, *Doctors Re-examine Circumcision*, by Thomas Ritter, M.D. and George Denniston, M.D., as a thank-you for their support.

This is the third edition of the original book, *Say No to Circumcision*. It features updated

research, statistics, and medical association policy statements. This book is an excellent resource for physicians, nurses, midwives, chiropractors, and expectant couples.

To get the book, please send in this coupon with your donation.

Thank you for your support!

BAD IDEAS FROM THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE

Real Quotes From Real Doctors

"It is indeed a curious fact that many, if not most, of those who oppose ritual circumcision are themselves Jews, and I can recall a conversation with an eminent physician, the son of a famous American rabbi, who boasted that he would not permit his sons to be circumcised . . . The Tenth Commandment specifically forbids us to covet that which our neighbor possesses, and in this general prohibition, we may surely include the foreskin, which the famous master Ricord designated as a "useless bit of flesh."

Dr. Abraham L. Wolbarst, M.D.

"Universal Circumcision as a Sanitary Measure" in the *Journal of the American Medical Assoc.*, 1914, vol 62, no 2, p 92-97

TELL THE TRUTH ABOUT CIRCUMCISION

How to Become An Informant

- ◆ Help us to educate parents and health care providers! A *tax-deductible* membership fee of \$25 or more makes you a **NOCIRC of Michigan Informant**.
- ◆ Free pamphlets and newsletters are available in bulk to anyone wishing to distribute them to parents & care providers.
- ◆ We exhibit at many conferences and health fairs each year. Please call to volunteer to help staff our information tables.
- ◆ Please let us know about relevant conferences or fairs that **NOCIRC of Michigan** may exhibit at anywhere in the state.

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