
■ NOCIRC OF MICHIGAN ■

INFORMANT

PREVENTING INFANT CIRCUMCISION — FOR THE WELL-BEING OF ALL

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“Who Owns My Son? Is He My Property?”

by Allena Tapia

“Do you want to circumcise him?”

“Have you thought about circumcision?”

“I don’t see a circumcision surgery scheduled . . .”

“Will his pediatrician be circumcising him today?”

During the course of my extended hospital stay following the emergency cesarean section birth of my son, Benicio (Benny), I was asked no less than four times in two days to make a decision to remove a healthy, functioning, beneficial portion of his penis: his foreskin.

I was asked four times to allow my son, whom I had kept safe, warm and sound for nearly ten months, to be taken from my bedside, without the company of me or his father, placed on a cold, sterile, plastic table, strapped down, and submitted to a useless, painful, and bloody removal of his foreskin.

Two of the times when I was asked to submit him to this procedure, I was under the influence of magnesium drug therapy, which severely impacted my thought processes and functions. One of these times, I was asked about the surgery at a time when my husband was not present to aid my comprehension and decision-making, or to help me in communicating our wishes. In addition, I was asked to sign several documents in this altered state, of which I had no idea as to the content.

Perhaps it is a miracle that Benny left the hospital with his foreskin intact.

Besides the ethics of being asked to make a medical decision under these circumstances, Benny’s intact penis also raised other ethical issues pertaining to the subject. For example, did I have the “right” as his mother, to consent on his behalf for unneeded medical surgery? What is it that makes my child seem more like my “property,” in that I can have his physical properties altered as I wish?

School children are taught about Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s efforts in the mid-1800’s to elevate and equalize the status of women. One detrimental belief they worked to change was the view of women as property. In addition, the two also decried the view of children as property. Specifically, in a letter to a colleague dated 1873, Stanton wrote: “When we consider that women are treated as property, it is degrading to women that we should treat our children as property to be disposed of as we see fit.”

Who owns Benny? Is he my property, to do with as I see fit? Does my husband hold a deed on his life? Do we together, as his parents, hold a title to his body? Should I not like the form of his nose, shall I sign him up for rhinoplasty? After all, should my residential property become somewhat non-aesthetic, I wouldn’t hesitate to undertake construction. If Benny, as my child, is my possession, what would the difference be?

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DIRECTOR’S MESSAGE

Last August marked my 10-year anniversary of setting up my first circumcision information table at a local event in Detroit. I had no idea of what I was really getting myself into by taking that first step in reaching the public about this controversial issue. However, my start as an activist was not when I dared to talk to total strangers about circumcision. Rather, it was when I uncovered something crucial about myself.

What turned me into an “intactivist” was when I discovered at that first event that in me lay the ability to successfully contribute, along with others, to the eradication of circumcision.

We have a long way to go towards this goal, but nevertheless, the seeds of change are now germinating all around us. My work for **NOCIRC** has taught me that we’re doing something that not only has made a difference in the lives of boys and men, but has had a lasting, inter-generational impact, and, quite literally, has changed humanity for the better. Your generous and continuous contributions of time and/or money will enable **NOCIRC of Michigan’s** success to continue far into the future.

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

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I do not own Benny. He is my son, not my property. I am his steward, his mother, not his owner. My charge is to raise him, safely, securely, and in his own best interests. If, in the future, when he is of consenting age, he feels the need to alter his own body, he may do so as he wishes. Until then, performing what amounts to cosmetic surgery on him is inherently unethical.

Some would argue that medical circumcision is in a child's best interest, and the decision would therefore fall under the stewardship of an ethical mother. After all, just look at the extensive listing of diseases it could help to prevent: urinary tract infections, penile cancer, uterine cancer in his future mate, maybe even HIV infection! Many of these claims are at best, scientifically unproven, and at worst, absurd. I have neither enough background nor enough time to dispute them here. Suffice it to say, "buyer beware."

I am more concerned with the moral implications of "surgery as prevention." After all, if breast cancer runs in my family, perhaps I should look into a double mastectomy. Heck, I desire to limit my family size to four, perhaps I should just sign myself up for an entire hysterectomy! After all, the medical establishment, especially the medical establishment at the hospital where I labored and birthed, seems to espouse the idea of "surgery as prevention!"

Unfortunately, many mothers make this awful decision without even attending to these falsely touted "preventions." Many mothers make this decision based solely on the mutilated status of the baby's father. What can we say about the ethics of "looking like Daddy?" Again, I'll return to Benny. Benny's father is Latino. I'm Caucasian. Poor Benicio received next to none of his father's pigmentation. Benny is as pale as me, destined to never quite look like his father.

Had I been an uninformed mother that time in the hospital, would I, too, have made this surgical decision lightly? Would I have insisted my son leave the hospital "looking like his father?" Fortunately, his father is also intact, so there was no consideration along those lines.

But what about his coloring? Perhaps I could have asked that Benny spend some time un-

der some UV lights prior to returning home. I mean, God forbid I bring a child home that does not look exactly like his father! Melanoma and premature aging be damned—my son must leave the hospital looking like his father! Few people would defend the decision of tanning a newborn for such a shallow reason, but let's admit it—this is the basis for surgery for thousands of infants leaving hospitals today.

Routine infant circumcision is not ethical. It is not medically substantiated. It is not necessary, and it is not a minor surgery. Given these truths, what can we do to ensure genital integrity for our nation's children?

Education: Education of mothers, who in all instances apparently mean the best, is the first and foremost step that needs to be taken. Mothers must be made to question this decision. To study it, not lightly, not peripherally, but to look at the facts with an open mind.

Exposure: This surgery needs to be exposed for the seriousness it is. Many genital integrity websites run a video of an infant circumcision. It is glaringly apparent that there is pain and extreme trauma involved for the infant. Few mothers would knowingly subject their child to such a bloodbath if they only knew.

Activism: Both of the above require the ongoing activism of organizations such as NOCIRC, NOHARM and Doctors Opposing Circumcision, which have provided quality websites, references and information to parents worldwide . . . and, not inconsequentially, saved the foreskin of at least one child I know.

Allena Tapia is the mother of two; Mari, age 4 and Benicio, age 1. She is studying education, with minors in Spanish and English, at Michigan State University. Her article originally was an entry in NOCIRC's 2004 College Essay Contest. She can be reached at tapia@msu.edu.

A book of essays submitted for the 2004 essay contest can be purchased for \$22 from NOCIRC headquarters, PO Box 2512, San Anselmo, CA 94979, 415 488-9883.

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.

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NOCIRC of Michigan Educating a New Generation

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Help Dads Protect Their Sons: *Buy Them Matching Underwear!*

by Pat Miller

"We want our son to look like his father."

Many supporters tell us that they can argue effectively against the medical myths concerning circumcision, but they don't know what to say when they are confronted with the "look like dad" defense for routine circumcision. Fears are notoriously resistant to rational arguments. Our task is made more difficult when we are staffing an exhibit table at a local event. Often, there is no time for prolonged conversation before parents move on to the next table.

Experienced activists have gathered a few quick responses over the years. Presented with kindness, even a quip or a counter-question can inspire parents to think, and maybe to stop to gather further information. Use your own experiences. I always tell parents that when I told my sons why they look different from their father, their response was, "Poor Daddy!"

According to Amber Craig, "The first thing I always say to the man who says, 'I want my son to look like me' is, 'How often do you think about your father's penis?' This always makes them uncomfortable and leaves them speechless. Then I explain that fathers and sons will always look different, and that difference doesn't matter. I also let them know that most men cannot tell me if their father was circumcised or not, and that even if they do know, they don't care. Their son won't either."

Here are some other responses you may wish to consider when speaking with parents:

While offering a pamphlet, say, "We have information about circumcision that your parents didn't have when they made this decision for you."

"Circumcision is falling out of favor. If you circumcise your son, chances are that he won't look like his son."

"Have you thought about how this decision was made for you? If you ask your father

and grandfather, you may find that they had little say in this matter."

A little boy's penis will not look like his father's until he is old enough to grow pubic hair.

"Your son will look like his father looked when he was born, before someone removed part of his penis."

"How far are you willing to go with this 'matching' business? What if your husband wears glasses or has a tattoo? What if he is bald?"

There is no such thing as a standard penis. Boys and their penises come in all shapes and sizes, whether they are circumcised or not.

Nobody worried about sons looking like fathers until circumcision became popular. Parents in England found it was no big deal when they stopped circumcising in the 1950's.

"Did you know that many doctors remove far less tissue now than they did when your husband was circumcised, to avoid problems caused when too much skin is lost? One of the most common complaints we hear from parents who choose circumcision is that their sons don't look circumcised."

My personal favorite response to use is from Shannon Darosett:

"As for the 'son should look like dad' comment: No matter how many times I hear this, I am struck by the absurdity of such logic. If father and son need to look so very much alike, buy them matching underwear. I have a feeling any son is going to be more perplexed by the differences between himself and Mommy, yet somehow, the sons learn to accept the differences."

Pat Miller is the mother of Matt, age 20, Erin, age 15 and Ryan age 13. She is the Director of NOCIRC of Toledo, Ohio. She can be reached at: patm-nocirc@accesstoledo.com.

A Foreskin Restoration Support Group Now Meets in Ann Arbor

Find out what you lost.

Find out what you can restore.

Find out what hundreds of men are doing to regain their sexual sensitivity.

Meetings are the second Sunday of every month from 3 - 5 pm. Contact

Bill at 734 330-8338 or

NORMofMichigan@yahoo.com.

Providing Informed Consent for Circumcision Now on DVD

"Providing Informed Consent for Circumcision" is a new educational DVD for health care providers and childbirth educators that is distributed and sold by **NOCIRC of Michigan**.

In his videotaped lecture, Dr. Robert Van Howe, MD, MS, FAAP, addresses the responsibilities and challenges health care providers and childbirth educators face in obtaining informed consent for neonatal circumcision. The elements of valid informed consent and how they apply specifically to newborn circumcision are outlined.

Dr. Van Howe provides authoritative strategies and tactics that respectfully provide the required disclosure about circumcision to parents while acknowledging their cultural sensitivities and preconceptions. This may challenge parents to reconsider their own assumptions about the practice, but providing full disclosure will lead to a greater appreciation of the significance of their decision.

Dr. Van Howe's videotaped lecture was delivered at the June 2004 conference of the *Michigan Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition*. Dr. Van Howe is a board certified pediatrician at Pediatric Specialists in Marquette, Michigan as well as a researcher who has published many journal articles on circumcision.

The DVD may be purchased for \$15.00 from **NOCIRC of Michigan**, PO Box 333, Birmingham, MI 48012. Call us at (248) 642-5703 to charge your order.

"Hey Dad, Whatever Happened to My Foreskin?"

Ask the Foreskin Farmers of America

by Norm Cohen

To many new biotechnology companies, the male foreskin is not the dirty and useless piece of skin that some physicians claim it to be. It turns out that the infant foreskin has many advantages for medical research and product development in the biotechnology industry. Of course, these harvested foreskins would have also had many advantages to the little boys from whom they were stolen when these boys were circumcised.

University of Michigan spin-off KeraCure Inc. announced in September a multimillion dollar investment to develop a high-tech bandage comprised of a dressing lined with skin cells extracted from amputated neonatal foreskin tissue. The company was launched three years ago with research and technology licensed from the University of Michigan and Wayne State University.

Over the last twelve years, several artificial skin and cosmetic products have been intro-

duced that have their origins in foreskins pilfered from infants. The market for these new products could reach several billion dollars annually. The easiest but least ethical way to get untainted cells for these products is from the foreskins of babies.

Tissue engineering companies claim that they can culture the cells from a single infant foreskin to make thousands of square feet of skin components. Cells from an infant will grow in a tissue culture for many more generations than those taken from older people, making them very valuable. Many more foreskins are used each year in medical research and testing laboratories.

The foreskin-derived products are used to treat burns and diabetic ulcers, as well as for skin-care products and research. The foreskin is filled with everything we begin to lose as we age. This includes growth factors, amino acids, proteins, collagen, and elastin.

Collagen forms the protein matrix of skin and can be derived directly from foreskins. Companies isolate fibroblasts, which are collagen-producing cells, from foreskins. The cells are replicated and then primed to pump out collagen.

Growth factors used in facial creams are engineered from these cells as well. Growth factors are proteins that can direct the skin to produce collagen and elastin to smooth skin and reduce wrinkles.

Companies like Proctor & Gamble and Helene Curtis have used foreskin-derived products to test their cosmetic products.

While the US State Department criticizes the practice of organ harvesting in third-world countries, the Food and Drug Administration grants approval for the sale of foreskin-derived products. Clearly, they have failed to recognize the violation of medical ethics and the crime in harvesting these foreskins without permission of the rightful owners.

WEB WATCH

www.CircumcisionVideos.com

This website sells a variety of videos about circumcision and foreskin restoration.

"*Whose Body, Whose Rights?*" is the most comprehensive video on the subject of male circumcision, and the only such program to gain recognition through several awards and broadcasts by PBS. It is sold on the website on DVD or for direct online viewing.

Special Offer to Members: Join or Renew Now!

New or renewing members of **NOCIRC of Michigan** who contribute \$35 or more are eligible to receive a copy of the book, *Doctors Re-examine Circumcision*, by Thomas Ritter, MD and George Denniston, MD, 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 expectant parents, childbirth educators, nurses, midwives, physicians, and chiropractors.

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

"Many wise physicians having performed routine newborn circumcisions have saved innumerable young men countless hours of having to perform the constant task of retracting their foreskins and extracting their smegma. Perhaps some of these young men have used this time in more profitable and pleasurable pursuits!"

Dr. Lawrence D. Freedman, M.D.
letter to editor

Journal of the American Medical Association
December 21, 1970, Vol. 214, No. 12, p. 2194

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 \$30 or more will make you a **NOCIRC of Michigan Informant**.
- ◆ Free pamphlets and newsletters are available in bulk to anyone wishing to distribute them to parents and 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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