
■ NOCIRC OF MICHIGAN ■

INFORMANT

PREVENTING INFANT CIRCUMCISION — FOR THE WELL-BEING OF ALL

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Answers to Your Questions About Religious Circumcision

by Norm Cohen

Whenever the subject of circumcision comes up, it is impossible to avoid mentioning the religious practice. Even without raising the issue, **NOCIRC** is frequently asked about its position on religious circumcision, both by those who practice it for religious reasons and by those who do not.

While **NOCIRC**'s main focus is not on religious circumcision, this article will make clear why a critical investigation of religious circumcision is both legitimate and important for all who care about the physical and mental health of children. For those who choose to freely examine the issues raised by this practice, no speculation about any other motivations behind its criticism will be warranted.

Religious circumcision is the only religious ritual that involves cutting away part of another person's body. The fact that this other person is a child who has not consented has made this practice a cause for concern by children's rights activists everywhere. Un-

like any other religious ceremony, circumcision always leaves a permanent and lasting affect on a child.

The practice of circumcision is 6,000 years old and it predates any existing religion. Peoples as diverse as the Jews, Muslims, and South African Xhosas all practice it, but none of them invented it. Archeological evidence proves it was well-entrenched in Egyptian culture 500 years before Judaism began.

In Judaism, circumcision is performed during a ceremony called a *bris* (or *brit milah*), and is done by a religious practitioner called a *mohel* on the eighth day of an infant's life. A *mohel* may be a rabbi, but this is not required. Most rabbis are not *mohels*. Most *mohels* are not physicians and not licensed or regulated by any governmental body.

The *mohel* leads the ceremony at the boy's home in front of his parents, relatives, and invited guests. If the *mohel* is not a physician, he is unable to legally obtain and administer adequate forms of anesthesia. He

recites prayers and the baby is given his Hebrew name. A party then follows.

Ritual circumcision as practiced by Jews is the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham, the first Jew. God said to Abraham in Genesis 17:10-12:

This is My covenant, which ye shall keep, between Me and you and thy seed after thee: every male among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of a covenant betwixt Me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any foreigner, that is not of thy seed.

Circumcision is practiced both by observant Jewish parents and by parents who do not regularly practice Judaism. According to one *mohel*, two-thirds of these families are not affiliated with a Jewish congregation.

continued on page 2 →

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

NOCIRC of Michigan has been at the forefront of the positive social change of ending the ignorance and denial that perpetuates infant circumcision. We have done our best for baby boys on our shoestring budget. It's hard work trying to change the world, but what is harder is trying to do it with little money.

Every year we are offered many more opportunities to reach people with our message than we have the money to pursue those opportunities. There are more professional conferences and public fairs to exhibit at, mass mailings to healthcare providers to do, advertising to buy, and informational handouts to print.

We would love to be able to pursue these additional opportunities. This means reaching out to more of our committed supporters and receiving more donations from them.

We have an 11-year track record of spending donations wisely on projects that have made a big difference in the lives of baby boys. Your generous and continuous contributions will enable **NOCIRC of Michigan** to work up to its potential, wisely and energetically, building on our successes far into the future.

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

continued from page 1

The 12th century Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides acknowledged the damage from circumcision:

There is no doubt that circumcision weakens the power of sexual excitement and sometimes lessens the natural enjoyment. The organ necessarily becomes weak when it loses blood and is deprived of its covering from the beginning.

The practice of circumcision was never universal in Judaism. Notable Jews from Moses to Theodore Hertz (the founder of Zionism) declined to circumcise their sons. Today in Sweden only 40% of Jewish boys are circumcised.

Circumcision does not make a boy Jewish. Jewish law says that a boy born to a Jewish mother is Jewish, regardless of whether he is circumcised. Circumcision is not a prerequisite nor is it essential to the practice of anything else in Judaism.

Large numbers of Jewish babies in the United States are circumcised not by mothers on the eighth day but by physicians in hospitals immediately after birth. This does not satisfy the religious requirements of Jewish circumcision. Non-observant Jewish fathers now follow “the American locker room look” when it comes to circumcising their sons. Like non-Jews, they base their decision on social conformity and on outside pressure.

For Muslims, circumcision does not have the same level of significance as it does for Jews. The ritual is required but is not one of the basic tenets of Islam. Islam adopted circumcision from the Jews, through their common ancestor, Abraham, and from Arabs who practiced it prior to Islam. It is not mentioned in their holiest book, the *Koran*, but it is in the *Hadith*, a collection of the sayings and deeds of the prophet Muhammad. There are no uniform set of regulations for circumcision, no specified age (other than before puberty), no prayers to recite, and no authoritative ceremony to follow.

The Hadith spells out five practices to be performed for bodily purification and cleanliness: 1) trimming the moustache, 2) trimming the nails, 3) plucking out the hair of the armpits, 4) shaving pubic hair, and 5) circumcision. The Arabic term, *khitān*, is used to refer to both male and female cir-

cumcision. The *Hadith* says, “*Khitān* is required for men and is a noble deed for women.”

Female circumcision has been practiced for centuries in many Muslim countries, but its practice predates Islam.

There is confusion about the need to circumcise among Christians because circumcision is required in the Old Testament of the Bible. In fact, more fundamentalist Christians cite religious reasons for circumcising their sons than do Jews.

However, circumcision was never a requirement in Christianity. St. Paul made this clear in Galatians 5:2-6:

I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Jesus was circumcised because he was a Jew, but Christians are not bound by Old Testament practices. For Christians, Jesus Christ is the new covenant, rendering all of the Old Testament practices, including the covenant of circumcision, null and void.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “Except when performed for strictly therapeutic medical reasons, directly intended amputations, mutilations and sterilizations performed on innocent persons are against moral law.”

Hindus do not practice circumcision and they regard this as an important distinction between themselves and Muslims. Sikhs abhor circumcision as unnatural.

No place in the Bible does it state that “cleanliness is next to godliness.” Nor does it say that a male will be healthier if he is circumcised. Cleanliness in the Bible is used frequently to describe *moral* purity and obedience of an individual before God. The re-

continued on page 4 →

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 healthcare 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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Saving Taxpayer Money on Medicaid Funding for Infant Circumcisions

As of July 2005 sixteen states, Arizona, California, Florida, Idaho, Louisiana, Maine, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oregon, Utah, and Washington have dropped Medicaid coverage for circumcisions performed at parental request.

Michigan's cash-strapped Medicaid system needs to follow their lead. New budget cuts will affect infant mortality prevention programs and children's vision and hearing screening. Michigan currently ranks third worst in infant mortality. Yet Michigan is *still* spending more than **\$2,596,237 annually** paying for **21,786 circumcisions** every year!

When other charges incurred with routine circumcison are included, Michigan could save 9 million dollars annually! *One in every 200 circumcisions requires additional Medicaid payments to treat complications from the surgery.*

Before another dollar is cut from the budget, make sure that free circumcisions are cut first!

Please ask the chairpersons of the Appropriations Committees and Sub-Committees to remove all funding for unnecessary circumcisions from the Department of Community Health's budget.

Over 21,000 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.

Tell state legislators that in this time of unprecedented cuts in Medicaid, Michigan's Medicaid system should stop using your tax dollars to pay for medically unnecessary and nontherapeutic surgery. Ask them to eliminate the waste of circumcisions that are not medically necessary from the Medicaid budget.

If you have already contacted them, don't hesitate to try again. Remember, if we can succeed in removing this coverage, we will stop 21,000 circumcisions a year.

Send out letters, emails, faxes, or make phone calls ASAP. *Always include your full name and mailing address so that the legislators know you are a Michigan resident.*

You can also contact your own legislators by visiting the Michigan's Children website at:
www.michiganschildren.org/page.cfm/81

Senator Shirley Johnson
Chair, Senate Appropriations Committee
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NOCIRC volunteers help get the word out last July at our booth at the Ann Arbor Art Fair.

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, *Circumcision Exposed: Rethinking a Medical and Cultural Tradition* by Billy Ray Boyd, as a thank-you for their support.

This 148-page book is an easy introduction into the controversy behind male circumcision. It surveys all of the reasons why people are rejecting the practice. It makes an excellent gift for expectant parents, childbirth educators, nurses, midwives, and physicians. **To get the book, please send in this coupon with your donation.**

Thank you for your support!

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.

NORM of Michigan is a support group for men who are interested in learning about, or who are currently undergoing, the process of foreskin restoration.

Meetings are the second Sunday of every month from 2:00 - 4:00 pm. Contact Bill at 734 330-8338 or NORMofMichigan@yahoo.com

www.NORM.org

wards from God for such righteousness include good health and long life. Physical cleanliness is a symbol of this moral cleanliness. Only much later were direct links made between good hygiene and good health. Circumcision became confused with good health because of its Biblical association with cleanliness, but modern medicine has yet to prove that it has any advantage over regular bathing.

Ritual circumcision is much more than a well-intentioned attempt at cleanliness. When performed on a nonconsenting person outside of a religious or medical context, it is not hard for anyone to see circumcision as genital mutilation. Female circumcision has long been regarded as such by Americans.

Any cutting of a girl's genitals by a religious community wishing to carry on their 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.

Some practitioners seek to defend male circumcision by claiming that studies have shown it prevents sexually-transmitted diseases. It is much more likely that their own religious prohibitions against intermarriage and sexual activity outside of marriage—not circumcision—protected the Jews and Muslims in these studies from disease.

Few Jews and Muslims actually chose to be circumcised. When supporters of the religious practice speak of their long history of circumcision, they don't mention that it has always been imposed on a child.

Obviously, infants are not aware of circumcision's religious significance. No religion claims that an infant undergoing a circumcision is having a spiritual experience. Circumcision for any reason can be considered an assault because it is forced upon a child and is a painful, traumatic, and, by its very definition, a disfiguring surgery.

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.

Circumcision is especially troublesome because the cutting is done not on a boy's face or arm, but on his organ of sexual pleasure. The circumciser intrudes into a boy's future by permanently altering his penis, his capacity for pleasure, and thus, his experience of sex. The ritual will be forever present on viewing his penis and during sexual activity in the form of an absent foreskin.

Voices within the progressive Jewish community have been struggling with their practice ritual circumcision for the last 165 years, since the beginnings of Reform Judaism. Some of circumcision's biggest public critics have been Jews.

Many new Jewish mothers have privately wished that the practice of circumcision would go away. Instead of a day of celebration, the bris milah often turns into a day of fear and guilt for the mother, possibly for the father, and for many of the invited party guests.

Several alternative *bris shalom* (covenant of peace) ceremonies have been created by Jews that meet the symbolic and communal obligations of the traditional ritual by welcoming a newborn into the Jewish community without the pain, trauma, bodily violation, and risks.

Circumcision advocates often resort to suggesting hidden motivations by those who oppose religious circumcision. An "anti-Semitic" accusation is used to intimidate legitimate critics of circumcision and to suppress further debate and media coverage.

However, **NOCIRC's** reasons for speaking out against religious circumcision are the same as the reasons we speak out against any circumcision. Neither physicians nor ritual circumcisers have the right to alter a boy's penis, as impure as they imagine it to be. A child has an absolute, universal, inalienable, and nonnegotiable right to the intact, unaltered genitals he was born with.

NOCIRC's mission is to provide factual, up-to-date information on circumcision and on the benefits of intact genitals. When today's parents of any religion feel free to explore this information and to act on it without coercion, they often choose to leave their baby intact—the way he was created.

Resources

Bris Shalom Ceremony:
www.NOCIRCoFMI.org/BrisShalom.htm

Brit Shalom Providers:
www.circumstitutions.com/Jewish-shalom.html

Christians for Wholeness:
www.Acts15.org

Catholics Against Circumcision:
www.CatholicsAgainstCircumcision.org

BAD IDEAS FROM THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE

Real Quotes From Real Doctors

"That the foreskin in man is the cause of much mischief, medical men are pretty well agreed. It affords an additional surface for excitement . . . In the unmarried, it additionally excites the sexual desires, which it is our object to repress."

Dr. William Acton, MD
A Practical Treatise on the Diseases of the Urinary and Generative Organs in Both Sexes, 2nd ed. 1851 London

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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