

CIRCUMCISION RESOURCE CENTER

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Questioning Circumcision: A Jewish Perspective

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OPENING STATEMENT

INTRODUCTION

I thank the Committee members for their work on this issue and the opportunity to contribute to this dialogue.

I address my comments mostly to the Jewish community. As a Jew and a psychologist, I understand the stress that religious communities feel in connection with questioning of circumcision. I raise such questions with the awareness that they may evoke a range of feelings. I empathize with and respect these feelings and also acknowledge the profound place that circumcision has in Judaism. However, I raise these questions out of deep caring and compassion for our community generally and our male infants in particular.

HARM

We are inflicting generally unrecognized harm with circumcision, and the perpetuation of this harm is a far greater concern than the discomfort that comes with confronting the advisability of this practice. Many Jews who do not circumcise in North America, South America, Europe, and Israel support this view.

EFFECTS ON INFANTS

First, there is the harm to infants. In a comprehensive review of medical literature, investigators concluded newborn infant responses to pain are “similar to but greater than those observed in adult subjects.”(1) This is the reason for numerous studies to find a safe and effective anesthetic for circumcision. There is no such anesthetic. At best, it only temporarily reduces the pain, and sometimes does not even do that.(2) Some infants do not cry because they go into shock from the overwhelming pain of the surgery.(3)

Researchers found that behavioral changes after circumcision include altered sleep patterns, activity levels, and mother-infant interactions, extended crying, and disruptions in feeding and bonding.(4) Infants may also withdraw after circumcision and be unable to communicate their needs.(5) Circumcised newborn infants have increased pain responses six months later.(6) This change may represent lasting neurological effects and a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

SEXUAL HARM

Multiple studies describe the sexual harm. Circumcision removes about a third of the erogenous tissue on the penile shaft, including several kinds of specialized nerves, resulting in thickening and progressive desensitization of exposed erogenous tissue.(7) The adult foreskin is a double-layer movable sleeve of approximately 75 square centimeters (twelve square inches). It protects the penile head, enhances sexual pleasure, and facilitates intercourse.(8) One man compared having sex after an adult circumcision to “seeing in black and white instead of in color.”(9)

Research shows that circumcised men are more likely to have erectile dysfunction, orgasm difficulties, and premature ejaculation.(10) They are 4.5 times more likely to use erectile dysfunction drugs.(11) Female partners of circumcised men have more problems with sexual function, fulfillment, and painful intercourse.(12)

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF CIRCUMCISION ON ADULTS

Several medical societies recognize the long-term psychological effects of circumcision.(13) Based on the collective responses of thousands of men, these effects include anger toward parents and others, sense of loss, shame, fear, distrust, grief, relationship difficulties, depression, sexual anxieties, reduced emotional expression and empathy, low self-esteem, and avoidance of intimacy. Many of these circumcised men wish they had been given a choice at a later time rather than having it forced on them when they were too young to resist.(14)

Circumcision is a trauma. For detailed information, I refer you to my book, *Circumcision: The Hidden Trauma*. Circumcision results in long-term symptoms that fit the pattern of PTSD such as avoidance of feelings and stimuli related to the trauma, reduced emotional response, and, for some, a tendency to anger. Avoidance symptoms explain why there has been virtually no public discussion of circumcision by those affected.

The expressed reasons for circumcision conceal an iceberg of underlying psychological factors. Circumcising a son re-enacts the father's unresolved traumatic emotional pain connected with his circumcision and allows the father to avoid confronting this emotional pain. Psychologists note that this compulsion to repeat the trauma is another classic PTSD symptom.(15) It can take the form of a compulsion to generate studies that are intended to show potential "health benefits" of circumcision, a socially acceptable way to promote circumcision trauma.

Of course, by seeking to show only benefits, circumcision advocates do not satisfy their burden to prove that circumcision is harmless. I have outlined some of the harm, and there are at least several dozen additional potential harms of circumcision that have not been studied.(16) In any case, the physical harm starts the moment an instrument penetrates or clamps a natural, healthy, functioning body part.

MOTHERS

Some Jewish mothers who observed their son's circumcision remain deeply troubled. Miriam Pollack recalled fifteen years after the event, "The screams of my baby remain embedded in my bones and haunt my mind."(17) Another mother: "My son and I sobbed our hearts out. The circumcision was a horrible violation."(18) Another mother: "I don't think I can recover from it. We had this beautiful baby boy and seven beautiful days and this beautiful rhythm starting, and it was like something had been shattered!"(19). Mothers risk trauma and PTSD symptoms themselves by observing circumcision.

One thing that was shattered was the bond between the mother and child. There are numerous studies that document the harmful behavioral, emotional, neurological, and social effects of disrupted bonding.(20)

CIRCUMCISION DISRUPTS JEWISH UNITY

Close examination of circumcision reveals deep ethical, intellectual, and emotional conflicts among Jewish parents. Repression of these conflicts undermines individual and community integrity.

Lisa Braver Moss related her experience:

I had profound doubts about my decision [to circumcise]. But because open discussion of Brit Milah seems to be discouraged in the Jewish community, I experienced my doubts privately and without comfort. . . . Thus, a rite intended to inspire feelings of Jewish unity evoked in me a sense of loss and alienation.(21)

Parents who feel forced into making a decision that conflicts with their better instincts may harbor feelings of resentment against the community and tradition to which they feel compelled to conform.

CIRCUMCISION OF OLDER CHILDREN

Muslims generally circumcise older children. A study of such circumcisions showed that circumcision is perceived by the child as an aggressive attack upon his body, which damaged and mutilated him. Circumcision resulted in increased aggressiveness and weakened the ego, causing withdrawal and reduced functioning and adaptation.(22)

In another study, children were observed to be extremely frightened during the procedure. A few weeks later, parents reported that their children exhibited increased aggressive behavior and experienced fears and nightmares.(23) These are PTSD symptoms.

NEXT STEPS

A shocked and regretful Jewish mother said, "I didn't know how horrific it was going to be." (24) The widespread lack of knowledge about circumcision results from avoiding and denying basic circumcision information about harm. It serves to protect adults from discomfort while increasing the risk that children will be circumcised.

We need increased awareness, education, and open, respectful debate. If parents are going to make decisions about circumcision for their sons, such decisions should be informed and based on complete information. I also recommend psychological support for children and adults.

To those who may be voting on this issue, please vote on the merits and your conscience. Future generations of children are depending on you to do the right thing.

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