

and its long-term effects, Prescott says the stress of circumcision damages the neural systems that mediate genital pleasure. In effect, he says, the baby's brain is encoded to associate pain with pleasure. In fact, the pain is so severe that it's not unusual for babies to go into a kind of shock, suddenly becoming silent and ceasing to struggle.

The foreskin is finally separated from the glans. Using a second hemostat, the doctor runs the point up inside the foreskin, clamps it to constrict blood flow, moves the hemostat a quarter inch, takes up the scissors and slices the skin along the clamp line.

Ten years after Milos founded her organization, 24 nurses at the St. Vincent Hospital in Santa Fe, New Mexico, declared themselves "conscientious objectors to infant circumcision." Later, several of them formed Nurses for the Rights of the Child. "Our goal is to protect unconsenting infants and children from surgical alteration of their genitals," says co-founder Mary Conant.

Two years ago attorney J. Steven Svoboda, a former Human Rights Fellow at Harvard Law School, founded Attorneys for the Rights of the Child. "Our position is that circumcision is medical malpractice," he explains. "The medical profession, which has perpetuated this tragic disfigurement of baby boys' genitals, will now be challenged by an organization of legal professionals."

The courts are already considering cases. On July 22, 1995, a jury in Montgomery, Alabama, found Jackson Hospital and Clinic guilty of negligence in a case where a newborn was mistakenly circumcised against his mother's wishes. The minor plaintiff was awarded \$65,000.

Suddenly the baby is quiet... mouth open, but no sound; body rigid. The foreskin is splayed open and bleeding. The doctor tears a hole in the skin and forces a hollow cone up inside the foreskin. The baby begins screaming again, straining at the straps. The stainless-steel cone keeps the glans from being cut off. Using both hands, the doctor places a heavy clamp over the child's penis, which protrudes through a hole in the clamp. The doctor tightens the clamp, picks up the scalpel, and in one smooth, practiced motion, circles it around the foreskin.

Most of the world's leading medical establishments have come out against this surgery. "Circumcision of newborns should not be routinely performed," says the Canadian Paediatric Society. "To circumcise...would be unethical and inappropriate," says the British Medical Association. The Australasian [Australia and New Zealand] Association of Paediatric Surgeons states: "Neonatal male circumcision has no medical indication. It is a traumatic procedure performed without anesthesia to remove a normal, functional and protective prepuce."

The AAP is expected to publish its new position on circumcision sometime this year. "This is just my opinion," says task-force member Dr. Shoemaker, "but I think the Academy is going to say there's not enough medical evidence to recommend routine circumcision—but that there's also not enough evidence to say it shouldn't be done at all." If this happens, the position paper will again be subject to interpretation, and it will be of little guidance.

Kent Kleppinger, M.D., a pediatrician who performs circumcisions, says, "I tell parents circumcision is cosmetic surgery. It isn't difficult to dissuade the mothers, but the fathers generally override their decisions. They want their boys to look like other boys in the locker room. They want their boys to look like them."

Like father, like son. This may be one of the hidden reasons why infant boys are still circumcised in America. But Shell Thompson, an editor for a national outdoor magazine and father of two boys, finds the "locker-room argument" specious. "I was a fat kid, a tub boat. I was teased unmercifully when I was a teenager. But so were the skinny kids and the kids with acne and the kids with red hair. At that age, boys will find something to pick on, no matter what's between their legs."

Thompson was circumcised as an infant but chose not to circumcise his boys, a decision that is becoming increasingly common. Rates for circumcision are dropping all over the country. On the West Coast they're already down to 34 percent. By the time a baby born today takes his first junior-high shower, he may be in the minority if he's circumcised.

It may all come down to the basic human rights of the child. In 1996, the Canadian Medical Association approved a code of ethics that instructs doctors

to "refuse to participate in or support practices that violate basic human rights." This suggests that, in the case of circumcision, parental preference should not override the child's physical rights to his body.

Margaret Somerville, professor of law and medicine at McGill University in Montreal and founding director of the Centre for Medicine, Ethics and Law, recently raised the hair on the necks of all North American pediatricians by declaring circumcision "technically criminal assault."

"Once you decide that circumcision is not medically necessary, you take away the therapeutic intent. Take away therapeutic intent, and circumcision becomes an unjustified wounding," she says.

Leo Sorger, M.D., writing in *ObGYN News*, is even more explicit: "Circumcision causes pain, trauma, and a permanent loss of protective and erogenous tissue. Removing normal, healthy, functioning tissue [for no medical reason]...violates the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 5) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 13)."

In September 1996, the United States Congress passed a law banning the mutilation of female genitalia. "Americans are horrified by female genital mutilation," says attorney Svoboda, "but they somehow don't recognize the routine torture going on in their own culture." He acknowledges that a clitoridectomy is a more serious and detrimental surgery than circumcision, but he argues that "human-rights law doesn't say if you cut off four toes, it's a human rights violation, but if you cut off only three, it's okay. That's not how human-rights law works. If it's wrong, it's wrong. Involuntary circumcision is wrong."

The foreskin is peeled away like the rind of an orange. The baby is still crying. After several minutes, the doctor removes the clamp, pops off his gloves, and leaves. The nurse quickly applies an antiseptic ointment and returns the trembling child to his parents. ♦

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

- ▶ **NOCIRC (415) 488-9883; www.nocirc.org**
- ▶ **Circumcision Resource Center, (617) 523-0088; www.circumcision.org**
- ▶ **American Academy of Pediatrics, www.aap.org**

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