

The penis is secured with a Gomco clamp and a steel cone is slipped over its head. Then the foreskin is completely cut away.

urinary-tract infections," explains Dr. Schoen, citing a well-known 1985 study, which he says has since been "overwhelmingly confirmed" by other studies. But Martin Altschul, M.D., a pediatrician and M.I.T.-trained mathematician, has reexamined the evidence and finds it fraught with problems.

"The whole body of research on this issue is a how-to-lie-with-statistics classic," argues Dr. Altschul. "Depending on how you collect the data, you can get almost any result you want." Dr. Altschul's own research also found that many of the urinary-tract infections in uncircumcised boys were "attributable to congenital anomalies." Recently, several studies have suggested that neonatal circumcision may actually increase the infection rate.

Dr. Schoen cites two other medical benefits of circumcision, namely decreased risks of developing penile cancer and contracting sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV and syphilis.

"You're more likely to be struck by lightning than to suffer from penile cancer," counters Dr. Van Howe. "Japan, Norway, Finland, and Denmark all have lower rates than the United States, and they don't circumcise their boys."

In fact, in 1996, representatives of the American Cancer Society wrote a letter to the AAP in which they pointed out that "fatalities caused by circumcision accidents may approximate the mortality

rate from penile cancer." The letter also stated that "perpetuating the mistaken belief that circumcision prevents cancer is inappropriate."

"Penile cancer is extremely rare—less than one case for every 100,000 men," adds Dr. Altschul. "It's preposterous to even suggest that because we have some minuscule risk of disease, we should cut off the foreskin of every little boy."

"Breast cancer in women is common," says Dr. Denniston, "more common than all the purported health risks of the foreskin combined. Does that justify cutting off all breasts at puberty?"

What about circumcised men and STDs? A recent study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that circumcised men did have a lower incidence of syphilis and HIV. But they had a higher rate of infection with herpes, hepatitis, and chlamydia. Overall, the study authors wrote, "We found no evidence of a prophylactic role for circumcision, and a slight tendency in the opposite direction."

"The bottom line," says Dr. Denniston, "is that the alleged benefits of circumcision don't approach the risks."

*The child struggles against the straps. The foreskin is attached firmly to the glans, and it's difficult to pry loose. The doctor scrapes the point of the hemostat in a circular motion around the glans, tearing the skin off the head of the penis.*

*The child continues to buck on the plastic form. This is why the Circumstraint is bolted to the counter.*

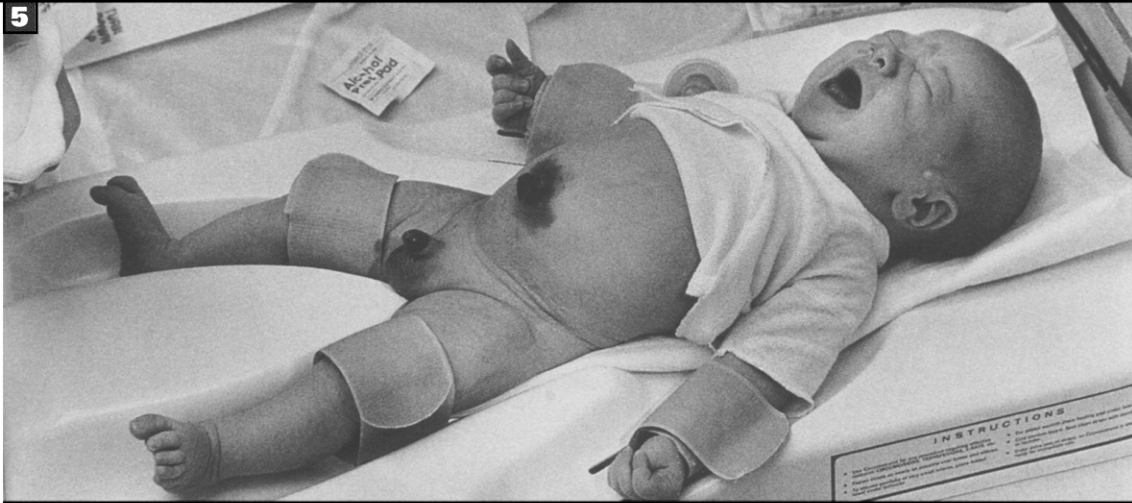
► **July 3, 1991; Oakland, California:** While circumcising a 12-hour-old baby, the doctor cuts off one-third of the glans. The severed head is "reattached," but the child is disfigured. A court awards the minor plaintiff \$256,000.

► **September 12, 1992; San Diego, California:** During a circumcision, a doctor cuts off a boy's glans. The doctor claims that since there is "no apparent loss of function," he met the standard of care. A jury awards the minor plaintiff \$36,400 in damages.

► **July 18, 1995; Houston, Texas:** A 5-year-old boy goes into a coma while being circumcised. He dies a week later.

"The complication rate for circumcision varies from 2 to 6 percent," says Dr. Van Howe. "The average male will have more health problems from being circumcised than from being left alone."

Some medical professionals believe that circumcision for other than religious purposes would disappear from America if it weren't covered by insurance. This is what happened in England, where the circumcision rate prior to World War II was roughly equivalent to that in the United States. After the war, British doctors could find no compelling evidence to continue the surgery, and it was dropped from the list



A dab of antiseptic, and the procedure is complete.

of covered services. Within a decade, the circumcision rate dropped from 50 percent among the working class and 85 percent among the upper class to less than half a percent in both.

"Why is this procedure still covered by HMOs and health-insurance companies? The simple answer is, because parents want it," says Patricia Wald, M.D., regional coordinating chief of pediatrics for Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in southern California. There, doctors counsel parents so they're making an informed decision, and don't perform the operation unless asked. "We cover it as a courtesy. But to me it's cosmetic surgery, like ear piercing."

Circumcision is estimated to be a \$400 million business in America. The average cost of the procedure ranges from \$50 to \$350, with \$115 being the average. The usual insurance reimbursement to doctors is around \$95. Dr. Van Howe claims that a busy doctor can generate \$25,000 a year from circumcisions alone. But Dr. Shoemaker disputes the contention that money alone lies behind the practice.

"After you counsel the parents appropriately and do the procedure," Dr. Shoemaker explains, "it's not a profitable use of time."

*The foreskin is still attached to the glans, and the doctor must rake the hemostat around the head of the penis several*

*times. The baby is shrieking now, his face red, his eyes squeezed shut.*

Circumcision is the only surgery in America routinely performed without anesthesia. Sixty-four to 96 percent of circumcised infants endure the procedure with nothing to deaden the pain. Until recently, doctors often told parents they didn't feel the same pain as adults.

"I didn't know what circumcision really was when I consented to have my three sons circumcised," says Marilyn Milos, founder and executive director of the National Organization of Circumcision Information Resource Centers (NOCIRC). "My doctor told me it was necessary, that it didn't hurt, and that it took only a moment to perform—like cutting the umbilical cord, I thought."

Ten years after her last son was born, Milos went back to school to become a registered nurse. As a student, she was asked to assist at a circumcision. "To see a part of a baby's penis being cut off—without an anesthetic—was devastating." Later, while working as a nurse, she made a videotape of the procedure and called it *Informed Consent*.

"Parents had no idea what was happening to their baby boys," she explains. "The point was to show them what circumcision really entailed." The hospital, Marin General in California, refused to allow expectant parents to view the tape. "They said it was too much for

parents to see. I said, 'Then perhaps it's too much for babies to experience.'"

In 1985, Milos founded NOCIRC. "It's all such an unspeakable cover-up. The doctors are in denial, so the hospitals are in denial, so the parents are intentionally, illegally uninformed. Circumcision is the worst fraud in American medical history." Recent studies support Milos' gut reaction to unanesthetized circumcision. A recent issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that "newborns...who did not receive an anesthetic suffered great distress during and following the circumcision, and they were exposed to unnecessary risk (from choking or apnea)." The report goes on to say that the skill of the surgeon did not reduce the pain, and that infantile amnesia (the "he-won't-remember-it-anyway" argument) can't justify it.

But even if doctors did use anesthesia, the reduction in pain would have to be measured against other concerns, such as the danger of using potent painkillers on day-old babies.

Then there is the question about how long the hurt lasts. "Circumcision causes such traumatic pain in newborns that it may have damaging effects upon the developing brain," says James Prescott, Ph.D., director of the Institute of Humanistic Science in Long Beach, California. A psychologist who has written extensively on childhood trauma

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