

Nurses Against Circumcision

Childbirth is miraculous, beautiful, traumatic, and overwhelming, all at the same time, for both the baby and the mother. But for many children born today, squeezing through the birth canal is the easy part. Soon after birth, males born to North American women routinely face amputation of a fully functioning, healthy organ – the foreskin.

Circumcision is so commonplace in North America, it has long been considered the norm. The World Health Organization estimates the male circumcision rate in the U.S. to be 76% to 92%, while the rates in most of the Western European countries are less than 20%. Globally, more than 80% of the world's men are left intact. An intact penis is not rare – an intact penis is the norm.

Medical professionals tell parents that circumcision is relatively painless, just a snip and it is over. Nothing could be further from the truth. Aside from the rare but possible complications, which include mutilation of the penis or death, the practice of circumcision is painful and traumatic.

The following nurses have come forward to share their knowledge and experience, to tell the truth about this practice.

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Nicole, A Former Nursing Student

A few years ago, I began an OB/GYN hospital clinical as a student nurse. One day, I was enlisted to attend a 'routine circumcision.

... I did not anticipate the lurching sensation that gripped my heart as I looked upon that baby. He was laying strapped down to a table, so small and new – pure and innocent – trusting –

all alone – no defenses.

I walked toward the baby and wanted to take him off the table and shelter him – to tell him that it would be okay, that nobody would hurt him on my watch.

Then in walked the doctor. Loud. Obnoxious. Joking with his assistant. As if he was about to perform a 10-minute oil change.

Not once did he talk to this little baby. I am not sure he even looked at him – really looked at him.

Rather, he reached for his cold metal instruments and then reached out for his object of mutilation: this sweet newborn's perfect, unharmed, intact penis.

I recall this little baby boy's screams of pain and terror – his small lungs barely able to keep up with his cries and gasps for breath.

I turned in horror as I saw the doctor forcefully rip and pull the baby's foreskin up and around a metal object.

Then out came the knife. Cut. Cut. Cut. Screaming. Blood.

I stood next to the baby and said, "You're almost done sweetie. Almost done. There, done."

*Then came the words from the doctor, as that son-of-a-b***h dangled this little baby's foreskin in midair and playfully asked, "Anybody care to go fishing?"*

My tongue lodged in my throat.

I felt like I was about to vomit.

I restrained myself. It was now my duty to take the infant back to the nursery for "observation."

... Back in the newborn nursery, rather than observing, I

cradled the infant. I held him and whispered comforting words as if he were my own. I'll never forget those new little eyes watch me amid his haze. He knew I cared about him. He knew he was safe in my arms. He knew that I was going to take him to his mommy. But, deep in his little heart, at some level, I know he wondered where his mommy was. While he lay there mutilated in a level of agony that we cannot imagine, in what was supposed to be a safe and welcoming environment after his birth, where was his mommy?

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Betty, RN

We are saying what is happening, because the male myth is, "Well, I was circumcised and I am fine, and my son was circumcised and he's fine."

But we're saying, "Maybe you were circumcised, but it wasn't fine, because we were there, and we saw what happened. It's the same thing with your baby. We were there, and we saw it. It was not fine."

*... That is the next step, for the grown men to come forward. It's happening now. There is a powerful coalition forming. We women are coming out as mothers and as witnesses to this brutal sexual assault. Women who have been circumcised in Africa are coming forward, too. We're all saying **this isn't okay.***

Mary, RN

We just wanted people to stop hurting babies. In 1992, we started a petition. Before that, I think we all had the sense that something was wrong, but we had never communicated about it. Everything I'd read said circumcision isn't a necessary thing to do, from a medical or health standpoint. So why are we doing it? You take a newborn baby, strap him down to a

board, and cut on him. It's obviously painful!

Circumcision became so intolerable that five of us wrote a letter saying that ethically we could no longer assist. When we were getting ready to present the letter, other nurses came out of the woodwork and asked to sign it. Out of about 50 nurses, 24 signed it.

Now we're conscientious objectors, but it's still going on. We can still hear it.

... Behind closed doors, you can hear the baby screaming. You know exactly what part of the operation is happening by how the screams are.

Mary-Rose, RN

My dreams were about taking the babies and strapping them down, participating in the whole thing, and having the babies say to me, "Why are you doing this? You were just welcoming me, and now you're torturing me. Why, why, why?"

I've watched doctors taking more foreskin than they should. When there's too much bleeding, they burn the wound with silver nitrate so that the penis looks like it's been burned with a cigarette. Then the doctor will tell us to go tell the mother that this is what it's supposed to look like.

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Chris, RN

I worked with countless intact men, mostly European immigrants in Chicago: Poles, Serbs, Lithuanians, etc. Younger men and older men. Men who could walk to the bathroom and men who constantly soiled themselves. Men who had indwelling Foley catheters and men who didn't. Men who were impeccably clean and men who were homeless. Men who were healthy and men who

were critically ill and severely immunocompromised. Never once did I encounter an adult male patient who had ever had a medical problem due to being intact.

... In fact, female patients are far more prone to fungal and bacterial genitourinary infections than male patients are—yeast infections, urinary tract infections, abscesses, etc. And we know that this is largely due not only to their shorter urethra, but also to their labial folds—their “excess” skin. Why don’t we cut that off? Why isn’t female circumcision considered for infection prophylaxis? That’s how we think of male circumcision. Except the reality is that, as with male patients, the “benefit” of circumcision would be negligible, because the number of serious complications with women staying “uncircumcised” is extremely minor.

So as it stands, we have two sons who are intact. One is almost five years old and the other is nearly three. They’ve never had a problem. During diapering they required **less care** and bother than our daughters did. And now, during bathing, we don’t retract or mess with their prepuce (foreskin).

They’re clean. They’re fine.

I suspect that someday they’ll be like my patients were: ninety years old and intact—with no regrets.

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Patricia, RN

I am a neonatal nurse practitioner with over 42 years of experience in maternal newborn health. I have seen many circumcisions, and I have been appalled at the pain that they have caused.

... In my experience as a neonatal nurse, I know that

circumcisions are painful, that little boys will cry for days after the procedure. They need to be medicated with Tylenol. They need to have injections at the penile nerve to try to prevent the pain, but it doesn't completely eliminate it. I have seen excessive bleeding after the procedure. I've seen disfigurement. I believe that little boys are made the way they are because it's absolutely fine to be intact. If there was a problem with foreskin, nature would not have put it there. So let little boys decide when and if they want to be circumcised. But parents, please spare your child the pain and unnecessary surgery that is not without risk. Just think about it.

I have seen, not loss of the entire penis but definitely disfigurement, and definitely excessive bleeding that has required intervention by GU specialists, suturing. Complications occur frequently.

...When babies are born, one of the first developmental tasks is to learn to trust the world, which means being in the comforting arms of their mother and father. To subject them in the first couple of days after birth to this terribly painful procedure just seems like the wrong way to start life. But the bottom line is: it is not necessary.

Jacqueline Maire, RN

I am a retired nurse in France as well as in British Columbia, a mother, a grandmother, and today I really want to speak specifically to female circumcisers, those who cut the penis of little boys. I have questions. What is your excuse? Were you at one point molested by a male in your youth that makes you now take revenge on any penis whatsoever and whatever the age of the victim, in this case, a defenseless little boy? Did you ever have an orgasm? And I'm not talking while you're making love, I'm just talking about sex. Never had an orgasm with an intact male and discovered the wonders and the

perfection of the act? Well. I feel sorry for you, but this is not an excuse to take revenge on defenseless children, baby boys mostly and I don't understand how you can do that without being ashamed of yourself. Well, it's just excuses, or medical excuses, or plain and simple fallacies. I feel sorry for you, but I also feel ashamed in the name of womanhood. You don't respect your Hippocratic oath if you even know what it's all about. Well, I'll remind you it's first "do no harm." You're just plain bitches, and I'm not insulting the female dog there. You are very mean, and I'm disgusted.

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Dolores Sangiuliano, RN

I'm a registered nurse, and we have an ethical code, the AMA Code of Ethics for Nurses, and it states very clearly that we are charged with the duty to protect our vulnerable patients. If we're not protecting our vulnerable patients, then our license isn't worth the paper it's written on. If anybody is vulnerable, it's a newborn baby. You know, a child with no voice, and that's why I carry this sign: "I will not do anything evil or malicious and I will not knowingly... assist in malpractice".

Infant circumcision is maleficence and malpractice. It's totally unethical. Proxy consent is only valid for a procedure. In other words, parents can give consent for a procedure for their child. That's proxy consent in a case of treatment or diagnosis, and circumcision is neither. You're not treating a disease, and you're not trying to diagnose an illness. So it just flies in the face of everything we know to be ethical, right, and moral. And I believe that forced genital cutting, all forced genital cutting, is always wrong. It should be consented to, fully informed consent, and that fully informed consent needs to include what you're cutting off the penis, the value of the foreskin, and the consequences

of changing the structure from a mobile, fluid unit to this dowel like structure, and that needs to be included. Ethical nurses educate their patients. Ethical nurses teach intact care, and ethical nurses don't participate in forced genital cutting ever.

A woman from Egypt came up to us and she said, "I totally agree with you. Female circumcision happens in our country all the time, and it's illegal but it still goes on. And it's our cultural shame." And she said, "I totally understand you having your cultural shame for doing this and it is the same thing." And we just had a total agreement conversation about, and it doesn't matter the varying degrees. We don't need to compare the varying degrees of harm. Because a lot of people say female circumcision is much worse. But right out of her mouth she said, "But no, it's the same. To the person having it done, it's the same." That was really good.

A Danish woman came and said, during her college days, she came to the United States and had a little bit of fun one season and she had sex with an American man. She was horrified because she didn't know what had happened to him. She thought he had been in some sort of industrial accident. She didn't know how to ask him or how to approach it. So that was an interesting tale, and I really appreciated the term industrial accident in a new way cause this is an industry, the medical industry. It's not so accidental. Although their intention is to say that they've improved our males, they, perhaps by accident, devastated us and devastated so many men sexually and in their souls.

Kira Antinuk RN

Feminism, at its best, encourages me to think broadly and critically about the potentially harmful effects of gender constructions on all people. To me, feminism should be more than a narrow interest group of women who care only about

women's issues or women's rights. My feminism is bigger than that. I believe that feminism can help us to identify and challenge discourses and practices that engender all of us.

... Upon review in 2009, scholars Marie Fox and Michael Thompson found that most feminists' considerations of female genital cutting either omit to consider male genital cutting altogether or deem it a matter of little ethical or legal concern. Why might this be? So biomedical ethicist Dena Davis observed that the very use of the term "circumcision" carries vaguely medical connotations and serves to normalize the practice of male genital cutting.

Conversely, it's worth noting, how the term female circumcision was essentially erased from academic, legal, and to some extent popular discourse following the World Health Organization's re-designation of the practice as FGM or female genital mutilation in 1990. The WHO's justification was that the new terminology carried stronger moral weight. So, terminology then, as well as the differential constructions of the practices themselves seems to protect male genital cutting from the critical scrutiny that other practices like female genital cutting attract.

Now it seems pretty clear to me, that this asymmetry extends to the very different understandings of genitalia and human tissue that we all have. Here in the West, for example, we're heavily invested in the clitoris to the extent, that its excision results in what Canadian anthropologist Janice Body referred to as "serious personal diminishment." Janice Body went on to say, "We customarily amputate babies' foreskins, not with some controversy, but little alarm. Yet global censure of these practices is scarcely comparable to that level of female circumcision. Is it because these excisions are performed on boys and only girls and women figure as victims in our cultural lexicon?"

Sophia Murdock, RN

After we had taken the newborn back to the “circ room” in the nursery, I watched the nurse gather the necessary supplies, place him on a plastic board [a circumstraint], and secure his arms and legs with Velcro straps. He started crying as his tiny and delicate body was positioned onto the board, and I instantly felt uncomfortable and disturbed seeing this helpless newborn with his limbs extended in such an unnatural position, against his will. My instincts wanted to unstrap him, pick him up, and comfort and protect him. I felt an intense sensation of apprehension and dread about what would be done to him. When the doctor entered the room, my body froze, my stomach dropped, and my chest tightened.

This precious baby was an actual person. He was a 2-day-old boy named Landon, but the doctor barely acknowledged him before administering an injection of lidocaine into his penis.

Instantly, Landon began to let out a horrifying cry. It was a sound that is not normally ever heard in nature because this trauma is so far outside of the normal range of experiences and expectations for a newborn.

The doctor, perhaps sensing how horrified I was, tried to assure me that the baby was crying because he didn't like being strapped onto the board. He began the circumcision procedure right away, barely giving the anesthetic any time to take effect.

Landon's cries became even more intense, something I hadn't imagined was possible. It seemed as if his lungs were unable to keep up with his screams and desperate attempts to maintain his respirations.

Seeing how nonchalant everyone in the room was about Landon's obvious distress was one of the most chilling and harrowing things I had ever witnessed. I honestly don't remember the

actual procedure, even though the doctor was explaining it to me. I can't recall a word he said during or after because I wasn't able to focus on anything but Landon's screams and why no one seemed to care. I only remember that the nurse attempted to give him a pacifier with glucose/fructose at some point.

Landon was "sleeping" by the end of the circumcision, but I knew it was from exhaustion and defeat. I had watched as his fragile, desperate, and immobilized body struggled and resisted until it couldn't do so anymore and gave up.

Seeing this happen made me feel completely sick to my stomach, and I told myself that I would absolutely refuse to watch another circumcision if the opportunity presented itself again. I was unable to stop thinking about what I saw and heard...

The sounds that I heard come from Landon as he screamed and cried out still haunt me to this day.

Darlene Owen, RN

The truth about circumcision is that it is not medically necessary. It is not cleaner. Studies have proven again and again that it has no direct relation on cancer etc. as was once thought. It is also a very painful procedure. The baby does feel it, experience it.

There have been studies that demonstrate actual MRI changes within an infant's brain after a circumcision has been performed.

As for those who claim "it looks better", my response is, "Really? Based on whose decision?" A penis with a foreskin is how the penis is **supposed** to look. **The foreskin has a function.** It provides protection of the very sensitive glans (head) of the penis, and it provides ease during intercourse.

During intercourse, the penis moves within its foreskin, preventing rubbing or friction of the vagina, which makes intercourse far more pleasurable for both the man and woman.

Many people will respond in outrage over female circumcision, yet still consider circumcision of males "the norm."

Many parents aren't properly informed of the procedure. It IS a very serious procedure with very many real risks involved. In my experience as a post-partum nurse, many parents who were led to believe it was a "minor" procedure and observed their sons' circumcision, were sickened just as I was at the actual pain and distress it caused their infant. I have had many patients who, after witnessing their first son's circumcision, decided immediately that they would not get any other boys they may have circumcised. Many parents told me that they wished they had known just how painful it would be for their son, that they would not have even considered it if they had known what is actually involved.

As for the argument that many men want their son to look like them, my answer is, "Why?" It is a stupid argument. Why can't parents simply teach their son that their son's penis is "normal and healthy", that "Daddy had his normal, healthy functioning skin of his penis removed surgically, unnecessarily." I also always say to those people, "Really? Well, watch an actual circumcision, and see if you still feel that way afterwards." I have yet to see any parent watch a video, or view an actual circumcision procedure, who is not completely against the idea afterwards.

An uncircumcised penis is very easy to keep clean. There is no special care required. The saying goes, "Clean only what is seen."

As for worrying about the son's foreskin not retracting, and needing a circumcision later in life, that actually only occurs in a very, very small number of males. However, even if

the male does need the surgery later in life, he will be put to sleep for the procedure and will not feel it. He will also be managed comfortably with pain medication. A newborn doesn't have any of those benefits. A newborn is awake for it, will feel it, and doesn't receive any pain medication.

Ask any grown male if he'd get his penis circumcised while awake, with no freezing, and I guarantee you'd hear a very loud resounding "NO!" Yet, many men will put their newborn son through it. Doesn't make much sense does it?

I realize that at one time it was considered the norm. Now, however, with all of the education about it, I cannot understand why parents still proceed to put their tiny little newborn son through such a horrific experience.

I am proud to say that I am an intactivist and the proud mom of two gorgeous, healthy, intact boys.

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Andrew, RN

I am a registered nurse. I work at a DC hospital. It's not part of my current job, but when I was in nursing school, I witnessed several circumcisions as part of my rotation, and I was interested in it because personally, I had developed an opposition to circumcision.

As an adult, I never had to be part of that decision not having a child. But I knew that if I did, it was one that I would want to make. And when I had the opportunity, I asked a doctor whom I watched perform it if he thought it was medically necessary because in my education, it is no longer stated, there is no longer a valid medical claim being made in the literature including in my nursing textbooks and so how can you justify it? And he said that he doesn't personally

justify it. He just knows that for the time being, it will continue to be done and he wants it done humanely and as well as possible. And he said "And I do it well" And indeed, he seemed to be proficient in it. I then asked him if he had noticed that the husband of the couple who had just had it done had seemed like he had his doubts and he said, "Yeah, I noticed that too". "Do you think someone should have discussed it further with him because he clearly didn't support the decision." And then he said that that happens all the time, that one of the two of the couple want that decision made and the other go along with it.

My nurse's perspective is that part of our job as an educator is to give more information, and so that would have been a great opportunity for someone to give that couple more information about whatever concerns the mother had that made her think that circumcision was the best decision. She seemed actually like she had some ill-conceived notions about the difficulty of keeping it clean, things that I knew that medically were not actually accurate. I actually thought at that time that I saw an opportunity for nurses to step in and educate her, to help and not tell the couple what they should do, but make sure they had the best information possible to make a decision, that again, is no longer being promoted clearly on the literature as medically necessary, including in my textbooks, and this was just last year.

Carole Alley, RN

And after the strap down and tie, they're still screaming. The screaming lasts the entire time. And I don't know if you've ever heard a baby scream like that. It's not a regular cry. It's not a cry of hunger or a cry of wanting to be hugged or a cry of having a wet diaper. This is a cry of incredible pain. I mean, it goes right through your body. Every cell in your body responds. And then the child is circumcised. You know, there are two different ways of doing it. Sometimes anesthesia

local will be used but for the most part, I've never seen babies stop crying, even if that's given. A lot of the time, it's not used. More often than not, it's not used. And then the clamp goes over the baby's penis and the foreskin is cut off.

Patricia Worth, RN

In my opinion, this is an abuse. There is not enough information out there to convince me that this is medically necessary. And just as I can read through the Old Testament of the Bible, and stoning women to death because they committed adultery, I see as abusive, this "ancient covenant," I look at it as a well, the human race has done all kinds of things and thought was the best thing at the time, and in retrospect, we can look back and go, blood sacrifice of human beings? This is not right. This is not morally right. This is not ethical. And especially when you're taking someone who has not consented. Parents can consent all they want. This does not mean the child has consented to this.

Marilyn Milos, RN The Mother of the Intactivist Movement

While working as a nurse in a hospital, she learned about circumcision by assisting doctors during the procedure. The obvious pain and distress felt by the infant prompted Marilyn to research circumcision. Afterwards, she was able to provide parents with all of the facts.

By offering true informed consent, she dramatically cut into her hospitals' cutting business. She was fired. Undaunted, she went to work saving our sons. She founded a non-profit known as NOCIRC, demonstrating that one person can still make a difference.

Here are her words:

The more we understand what was taken, the more we understand the harm of circumcision, that it is a primal wound, that it does interfere with the maternal-infant bond, that it disturbs breastfeeding and normal sleep patterns. Most importantly, that it undermines the first developmental task, which is to establish trust. And how can that male ever trust again? And I think that's very hard for a lot of men and why men need to have control and be in control, and their reactions to make themselves more safe.

It was so amazing to me when I worked in a hospital, and my first question would be, "I see—I see that you're gonna have the baby circumcised, and may I ask why you've chosen circumcision for your baby?" And they would say, "Oh, because I'm a Christian." And I said, "Do you know that there's 120 references to circumcision in the New Testament, that circumcision is of no value? If you're a Christian you don't live by outward signs. You live by faith expressed through love. Christ shed the last—was the last to shed the blood. He was the ultimate blood sacrifice for everybody. We don't need to do this again."

Conclusion

The hardest moral dilemmas seem to lie at the crossroads of two or more moral principles. In this instance, the right to religious freedom and the right to bodily integrity are in conflict for some parents. But if we are to uphold the right to bodily integrity for girls regardless of religion (Muslims often circumcise girls), shouldn't we allow the same protection for boys?

Although religion is a factor, many parents choose circumcision simply because it is considered the norm. Myths about disease and cleanliness add to the confusion. When parents are not given all the facts, they cannot make an informed decision. On average, nurses are poorly equipped to

answer their questions about circumcision. They do not educate parents, explaining the 16 functions of the foreskin or teach parents how to care for an intact child. (Nothing! Do not retract the foreskin. It cleans itself!)

Our sons' genitals are carved apart in the name of healthcare when in actuality the practice is a profit-making enterprise. Circumcisions generate a lot of money for hospitals, while intact penises bring in no money at all. So while it is ethical for a nurse to provide parents with informed consent, it is wholly unprofitable for them to do so.

The truth will win. Circumcision is a profound violation of human rights. This conclusion is inescapable once we begin to think critically about the practice.

Author's Note:

Male genital mutilation is still legal in all 50 states, and although Marilyn Milos hasn't yet completely changed the world, she changed mine.

I am the second born of two sons. My older brother was circumcised. I was not.

Before my birth, my mother met a neighbor who had been given literature from NOCIRC. The sharing of this information about the benefits of the foreskin and the dangers and drawbacks of circumcision is the reason I was left intact.

Marilyn Milos bet on the idea that when given all the facts, more parents would make the right decision, and in my case she was spot on. I am intact, my sons are intact, and my nephews are intact.

Marilyn, I can never thank you enough for what you've done for me and for my family. You are an inspiration to us all.

Sources

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