

Circumcision

Excerpted from Gentle Baby Care by Elizabeth Pantley

Male Circumcision

Elective circumcision is an amputation and mutilation, and, no significant medical group in the world defends it as having any therapeutic value. In 1999 the Council on Scientific Affairs of the American Medical Association stated that neonatal circumcision is nontherapeutic because no disease is present and no therapeutic treatment is required.

Dr. Morris Elstein is the only doctor (that we are aware of) who will perform this surgery on your homebirthed son. He is not only a doctor but also, a special religious person called a *Mohel*. He can perform the surgery on the eighth day of life. You can contact him at his office in Virginia Beach, VA at (757) 481-4036.

For some parents, circumcision has a deep religious significance; the procedure is central to establishing a newborn boy's identity. But for many other parents, the circumcision decision has become increasingly difficult.

Thirty years ago, up to 90% of American newborn baby boys were circumcised; currently, around 60% are circumcised. On the west coast, this figure has gone as low as 40%, and in parts of Canada, 25% and less. Worldwide, the uncircumcised penis is clearly the norm: 85% of the world's male population has "intact" (uncircumcised) penises.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has made it clear that there is no right or wrong decision on the circumcision issue.

This is a decision that cannot be made overnight, and you are right to think about, research and discuss the pros and cons of circumcision well before your baby is born. While this issue occasionally is highly sensationalized and passionately debated in the media, be sure to look as objectively as possible at the procedure, its history and its potential benefits and risks. In the end, you are the only ones who can make the decision about what is best for your child.

What exactly is circumcision?

Every physically normal male is born with a foreskin, or prepuce, that covers the glans (tip) of the penis. The inside of this foreskin is a mucous membrane similar to the inside of the cheek, with numerous nerve endings. The foreskin is thought to protect the glans and to keep it moist and clean.

During a circumcision, the physician removes the foreskin surrounding the glans. The procedure is normally performed within the first two weeks of life, because the risks of a circumcision are greater if the baby is more than two months old.

There are several different surgical approaches, but the following is typical: The baby is put on his back, and his legs and feet are restrained. Then the foreskin is separated from the glans with a type of forceps (necessary because tight adhesions connect a baby's foreskin with his glans). Clamps hold the foreskin in place, a protective cover is put over the glans, the foreskin is pulled over the cover, and then about one-third to one half of the skin is cut off using a clamp. Antiseptic petroleum jelly may then be put on the penis to prevent irritation and infection.

Where did circumcision start?

Circumcision has existed for thousands of years, going back to Egyptian times; it is typically an intricate part of religious faith for Jewish and Muslim families. In the United States, circumcision was not practiced widely, however, until the late 19th century. Around the beginning of the 20th century, cleanliness became associated with wealth, and a circumcised penis was thought to be cleaner; about 25% of men were circumcised at that point. In the 1930s, the military began requiring circumcisions because soldiers in the field had little access to water, and maintaining adequate personal cleanliness was difficult. Studies in the 1940s and 1950s (some of them questionable) showed medical advantages for circumcised men and their partners and circumcision became almost universal within the United States.

Circumcision has always carried an element of tradition: When the father is circumcised, the parents want their son to "be like the father" (or the brother, or the other boys in the locker room). This is probably a key reason for the relatively high rates of circumcision in the United States.

Opinion has started to change, however, and the rate of routine circumcision is decreasing. Recent studies have shown benefits of circumcision as well as risks, and the decision falls fully into the hands of parents. Below are two tables looking at arguments for and against circumcision.

Arguments in favor of (non-religious) circumcision:

| Reason | Supporting evidence | Arguments against |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lower chance of urinary tract infection (UTI) in first year of life | Studies show that circumcised boys have a 1 in 1000 chance of UTI, vs. 1 in 100 chance for uncircumcised boys. | UTIs are rare in boys and are easily treated. |
| Penile cancer prevention | Cancer of the penis is three times more common among uncircumcised men than circumcised men, among whom the disease is virtually nonexistent. | Penile cancer affects only one in 100,000 older men and is related to sexual behavior. |
| Lower risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) | Some studies have shown that the risk of STDs, vaginal disorders in partners, and HIV are lower for circumcised men. | Risk is only slightly lower, and sexual behavior is a much better predictor of sexually transmitted disease frequency and type. |
| Cleanliness | Uncircumcised males risk infection of the foreskin. | Simple education about good hygiene virtually eliminates this risk. |
| Prevention of a more complicated circumcision later in life | There are sometimes medical reasons for circumcision, such as phimosis (a condition in which foreskin retraction is impossible); post-infancy circumcisions are | Phimosis and other penile conditions requiring circumcision are not very common and not generally |

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|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | painful and carry a higher risk of complications. | considered a valid reason for routine circumcision. |
| A son should "look like" his father | Some people worry that there may be confusion or even psychological problems if the father's penis is circumcised and the son's is not. | Boys won't necessarily "look like" their fathers in all ways anyway -- hair color, eye color, body shape all may differ -- as may the penis. |
| Worry about being "strange" | In the past, some adult men have requested circumcisions because they have heard from sexual partners that their penises were "strange," they were teased as children or they felt embarrassed in locker room situations. | The statistics have changed so dramatically that, whatever your decision, your baby is unlikely to be considered "strange" in this regard. (In any case, children should be taught to respect individual differences.) |

Arguments for an intact (uncircumcised) penis

| Reason | Supporting Evidence | Arguments against |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| No medical reason for the circumcision | Why remove a part of an infant's body that functions perfectly well? Circumcision interferes with the way nature intended the body to be. | For full-term healthy infants, few risks are entailed in removing the foreskin, while there are some possible medical benefits. |
| Fear of complications | As with any surgery, risks are involved, including excessive bleeding, infections or injury to the penis. There are also cosmetic concerns, as the foreskin can be cut too long or too short or can heal improperly. | Complications are very rare. This is among the safest of surgical procedures; cosmetic complaints are rare. The complication rate is thought to be one in 200 to one in 500. |
| Pain of the procedure and the memory of the pain after the procedure | Studies show infants experience substantial pain from the procedure, as shown by increased heart rate and blood pressure; the "memory" of the pain lasts, as infants circumcised without analgesia have increased sensitivity to vaccinations at four months. | The AAP now recommends that some form of pain relief be used for all circumcisions. Complications from these pain medications are rare. |
| Possible risk of conditions that develop because a foreskin is not present | When the foreskin is removed, the glans can become irritated, causing the opening of the penis to become too small. Ultimately, this leads to urination difficulties and requires surgery. Other | Penile problems developing on a circumcised penis are uncommon. |

| | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | possible conditions are tight, painful erections or adhesions and skin tags. | |
| Worry about decreased sexual sensitivity | Some people feel the glans toughens up without its protective cover, and the penis is desensitized. | No study has shown that circumcised men experience less sexual pleasure. |
| Lack of consent for a potentially life-changing operation | Why not wait until the boy has the chance to choose for himself? Subjecting an infant to an unnecessary surgery that will change his body is unfair. | Later in life, circumcisions are more painful and more dangerous. Parents have to make many life-changing decisions on behalf of their infants; that's the nature of parenthood. |
| Financial reasons | In some areas, insurance companies or Medicare will not cover the cost of the circumcision (viewing it as an elective procedure). | Many circumcision costs are still covered within the U.S. (but not in Canada); you must check with your insurance provider to verify. The surgery is generally not expensive. |

Pain relief

One thing is abundantly clear, it is a painful procedure for the baby. Pain relief should be provided to the infant undergoing a circumcision, as the ridiculous belief that infants do not feel pain during circumcision has been completely refuted. The American Academy of Pediatrics now recommends analgesia for all circumcisions, as it is "both safe and effective." The three primary forms of pain relief are a topical numbing cream (EMLA), a dorsal penile nerve block (a local anesthetic injected into the penis) or a subcutaneous ring block (also a local anesthetic).

If you do decide to circumcise your son, be sure that you have discussed the issue with your doctor, make sure that you understand exactly what will happen during the operation and what type of pain relief will be used, what the possible risks are of the surgery and of the analgesia (pain relief). Be sure that you have read the consent form very carefully and be sure that you understand what to expect as the circumcision wound heals.

Female Circumcision

Female genital mutilation, sometimes referred to as female circumcision, is a common practice in many cultures. It involves the removal of part or all of a female's clitoris. Sometimes the opening of the vagina is sewn almost completely shut. It is often done without any pain medicine. The purpose of this practice is to prove that a female is a virgin before she gets married, reduce her ability to experience sexual pleasure after marriage, and promote marital fidelity. There are several serious side effects, including:

- Pelvic and urinary tract infections
- Negative effect on self-esteem and sexuality
- Interference with a female's ability to have a normal vaginal delivery

Answers from the Bible to Questions about Circumcision

Circumcision is as controversial today as it was in New Testament times. Then, as now, it could tear marriages and families apart. Fortunately, insights we can gain from the Bible about circumcision can guide us today.

What is circumcision?

Circumcision cuts off the foreskin, the sexually sensitive sleeve of tissue that normally covers and protects the head of the penis.

Is circumcision today the same as circumcision in the Bible?

No. The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion traces the origin of *peri'ah* (the baring of the glans) to the time of Hadrian (A.D.132-135):

Many Hellenistic Jews, particularly those who participated in athletics at the gymnasium, had an operation performed to conceal the fact of their circumcision (1 Maccabees 1.15). Similar action was taken during the Hadrianic persecution, in which period a prohibition against circumcision was issued. It was probably in order to prevent the possibility of obliterating the traces of circumcision that the rabbis added to the requirement of cutting the foreskin that of *peri'ah* (laying bare the glans).

(The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion, ed. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and G. Wigoder. Oxford University Press, 1997, page 161.)

The New Testament predates this development (see 1 Corinthians 7:18). Medical circumcisions developed from the later, more radical rite, so today's infant circumcisions are more severe than circumcisions in the Bible.

Is the foreskin a mistake of nature?

No. The Bible says that God pronounced creation 'very good' (Genesis 1:31) and that humans were made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). The Apostle Paul also said that God made every part of the body as he wanted it. (1 Corinthians 12:18).

How did circumcision start in the Bible?

According to Genesis, God told Abraham to circumcise himself, his household and his slaves as an everlasting covenant in their flesh. Those who were not circumcised were to be 'cut off' from their people (Genesis 17:10-14). Note the connection between circumcision and slavery. It is alluded to in the New Testament.

Who was to be circumcised?

Abraham, his descendants and those who were bought with their money (Genesis 17:12-13). Also, all the males of a household were to be circumcised if one of them wanted to join in the Passover celebrations (Exodus 12:43-49).

However, there is a puzzle. Laws commanding circumcision are said to come through Moses (e.g. Leviticus 12), but the Children of Israel abandoned circumcision during Moses' leadership (Joshua 5: 4-7). Exodus 4: 24-26 tells us that Moses had not circumcised his own son.

This suggests several scribal traditions. In the first, Moses did not practise circumcision, and the custom was abandoned under his leadership (Joshua 5: 4-7). In the second his wife is made to conform to the practice (Exodus 4: 24-26). Finally, in the third tradition, he is given the command to circumcise from the LORD himself.

Did circumcision apply to anyone else?

Circumcision applied to the slaves of Jews. Apart from that, circumcision never applied to people outside the Jewish faith. The first covenant was not with other nations. All other people were described as uncircumcised,

even those who practised circumcision (Jeremiah 9:25-26). Circumcision never applied to Christians (Acts 15:5-11). The Apostle Peter, who was circumcised, said:

... we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.
(Acts 15:11, New RSV)

Should Christians follow the Law of Moses?

No. Christians were freed from the Law, including circumcision (Acts 15:1-20). It was described as an almost unbearable yoke on the neck (Acts 15: 10). The yoke, of course, was a sign of slavery and Christians were told not to become entangled with 'a yoke of bondage' (Galatians 5:1-2).

The Law as we read it contains things that appall us, such as forcing a rapist to marry his victim (Deuteronomy 22:28-29) or rejecting people born out of wedlock and their descendants (Deuteronomy 23:2). However, almost all of us read the Law in translation, which inevitably changes and distorts the text. Even fewer read it with a background of the checks, balances and insights of the Jewish oral and legal tradition. This has contributed to atrocities such as when Christians used Exodus 22:18 to justify the slaughter of 'witches' or other verses to justify slavery and the slave trade (e.g., Exodus 21:2-11, 20-21, Leviticus 25:44-46 and Deuteronomy 20:10-15).

What does this mean for Christians?

Christians must be wary. Many of these laws, including the food laws, were repudiated in the New Testament (Acts 10:1-33). Jesus himself criticized the scribes and their traditions. (e.g., Matthew 15: 1-9, *also* Isaiah 29 :13). Jeremiah's assessment of the Law must also be pondered.

How can you say, "We are wise,
and the law of the LORD is with us,"
when in fact, the false pen of the scribes
has made it into a lie?
(Jeremiah 8: 8, New RSV)

Why are Bible stories about circumcision so vicious?

There has always been a nasty underside to circumcision. Whether it was Greek authorities killing Jews for circumcising their infant boys (1 Maccabees 1: 60-62), Jewish zealots forcibly circumcising uncircumcised Jewish boys (1 Maccabees 2: 46) or Muslim zealots forcibly circumcising Christian men, women and children in Ambon, Indonesia ([Sydney Morning Herald January 27, 2001, page 25](#)), there has always been a powerful undercurrent of violence and sexual abuse associated with circumcision.

The Bible tells us about circumcision as it is. Stories such as the circumcision and slaughter of the Shechemites (Genesis 34) or the 100 foreskin dowry (1 Samuel 18: 25-27) carry an implicit warning that was made explicit by the Apostle Paul when he said:

It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that would compel you to be circumcised...
...they desire to have you circumcised that they may glory in your flesh.
(Galatians 6:11, 13, Revised Standard Version)

Jesus was circumcised. Does this make it right?

Jesus was also wrapped in swaddling clothes and put in a manger (Luke 2: 7). This doesn't mean we have to wrap babies tightly in cloth and put them in animal feeding troughs or circumcise them. Jesus also had a crown of thorns forced onto his head and was crucified. (John 19). We don't do that to our children, either. It is better to take to heart what Jesus taught about circumcision and circumcisers.

What did Jesus teach about circumcision and circumcisers?

Jesus spoke about circumcision in the Temple in Jerusalem (John 7:14).

Moses therefore gave unto you circumcision; (not because it is of Moses, but of the fathers;) and ye on the sabbath day circumcise a man. If a man on the sabbath day receive circumcision, that the law of Moses should not be broken; are ye angry at me, because I have made a man every whit whole on the sabbath day? Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.

(John 7:22-24, King James Version)

Or, from a modern version:

...why are you angry with me for making a man whole and complete on a sabbath? (Jerusalem Bible, John 7:23.)

Jesus contrasted circumcision (cutting off foreskins) with his own healing, which made a man 'whole and complete.' Jesus' conclusion, not to judge by appearances, also hit the mark, for his critics rejected those who were not circumcised.

But didn't Jesus just mean that he made the man completely well?

That is what you will read in most modern English translations. However, the Greek expression for making a man completely well could also be translated as making him completely whole. This meaning, with its powerful contrast with circumcision, came over easily in the King James Version. The Jerusalem Bible got this meaning across with 'making a man whole and complete'. Moffatt did it slightly differently:

...are you enraged at me for curing, not cutting, the entire body of a man upon the sabbath?
(from John 6:23, Moffatt's translation, 1935)

A note in the Jerusalem and New Jerusalem Bibles claims that the Rabbis argued that circumcision 'heals' the penis so they were doing a little healing while Jesus was doing a big healing. The great Jewish sage, Moses Maimonides, rejected this line of argument:

The fact that circumcision weakens the faculty of sexual excitement and sometimes perhaps diminishes the pleasure is indubitable. For if at birth this member has been made to bleed and has had its covering taken away from it, it must indubitably be weakened. (*from Moses Maimonides, "The Guide of the Perplexed", Part III, ch. 49*)

Moses Maimonides would have seen and understood the contrast that Jesus made between *circumcising* a man and making a man completely *whole*.

What did the early church decide about circumcision?

Some were saying that Christians must follow the Law of Moses and be circumcised. Peter replied:

Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?

(Acts 15:10, New RSV)

The early church followed Peter, and all were welcome, circumcised or not. The early church *rejected* the ideas that Christians had to be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses.

What did Paul teach about circumcision?

Genesis 17:14 says that an uncircumcised man shall be 'cut off from his people' but Paul taught that those who

accept circumcision are obliged to keep the whole law, and those who want to be justified by the law have cut themselves off from Christ (Galatians 5: 2-4).

Paul confirmed that circumcision was *nothing* (Galatians 6:15) and Christ was *all* and *in all* (Colossians 3:11). Jeremiah had already taught that circumcision in other nations was uncircumcision (Jeremiah 9: 25-26).

Paul advised people to accept their lot in life and not seek circumcision or uncircumcision, or slavery or freedom (1 Corinthians 7:17-24).

Paul condemned people he described as *false believers* (Galatians 2:4). These people were pressuring Christians to become circumcised. Paul was so incensed by this that he said:

I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!
(Galatians 5: 12, New RSV)

Paul taught that Jesus accepts people as they are and does not ask them to become circumcised or uncircumcised to become Christian (Galatians 5: 6). Paul said, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...' (Acts 16: 31).

If Paul was against circumcision, why did he say that circumcision was of much advantage in every way?

That is how most translations read Romans 3: 1-2. However, it is not the only reading. Young's Literal Translation (1898) says:

What, then, is the superiority of the Jew? or what the profit of the circumcision? Much in every way; for first, indeed, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.

At that time, the Jews were called 'the circumcision'. It could simply have been another way of referring to Jews. Paul's words explain themselves best in context. In the verse immediately before the one quoted above, Paul said that true circumcision was spiritual, not literal (Romans 2: 29). As for the profit or advantage of 'the circumcision', this came from the *oracles of God* that Jews were entrusted with.

Paul circumcised a man, but later he called circumcisers mutilators. Why?

Paul turned against circumcision. At first he gave in to pressure to circumcise Timothy (Acts 16: 1-4). (Timothy's mother was Jewish, so Timothy was Jewish by Jewish law.) However, Paul absolutely refused to circumcise Titus (Galatians 2:3) and opposed those false believers with fury. He wished they would castrate themselves, accusing them of wanting to make 'a good showing in the flesh' and 'glorying in the flesh' (Galatians 6: 12-15, RSV). In Philippians he warned believers to beware those who mutilate the flesh (Philippians 3: 2). Finally, in Titus he says that 'those of the circumcision' (from Crete) were 'upsetting' or 'ruining' whole families and were in it for the money (Titus 1: 10-12). What he had found out about circumcisers changed his mind.

Was circumcision ever a Christian tradition?

Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches never adopted circumcision. Circumcision was condemned in [The Ecumenical Council of Florence](#) on 4 February 1442. One exception was the Coptic Church in Egypt, and the Council condemned this practice amongst them. Routine infant circumcision never took off in Europe but circumcision enthusiasts promoted it in English-speaking countries from the late Victorian era. As a result, some Christians have been misled into believing that Christianity recommends circumcision. This is simply not true.

Does the Bible ever say that circumcision has health benefits?

No. The Bible never makes such a claim. Jewish authorities hesitate to circumcise a baby if two previous sons

had died from circumcision. Even today, circumcisions lead to hemorrhage, infections and sometimes even death.

The Apostle Peter said that circumcision and the Jewish law were an unbearable burden. He was a married man and he lived before aseptic surgery, blood transfusions and antibiotics. Did he or someone close to him lose a child to circumcision? We don't know. What we know is that the first church council supported Peter, and not the circumcision enthusiasts. (Acts 15: 10)

What does the Bible say to parents who are in conflict over circumcision?

In 2001, a young Kansas woman was convinced that God wanted her to have her son circumcised. Her husband was adamant that his son would remain intact and took legal action to protect the baby. The marriage fell apart in a blaze of publicity. (Wichita Eagle, [13](#) & [25](#) July 2001)

The couple's pastor had tried to get the father to agree to circumcision.

One wonders what the Apostle Paul would have said to this pastor! He described those pushing circumcision as:

... rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision; they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach. It was one of them, their very own prophet, who said,

"Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons."

That testimony is true. For this reason rebuke them sharply, so that they may become sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths or to commandments of those who reject the truth. (Titus 1:10-14, New RSV)

What about those who urge others to circumcise their children?

Some believe in circumcision because of what they have been told. Christians should consider Paul's words:

God put every different part of the body, just as he wanted it to be. (Good News Bible, 1 Corinthians 12: 18)

If Christians take this to heart they will have strength to resist the circumcision enthusiasts. As someone said to a knife-happy doctor, 'God knows best how to make little boys.'

Michael Glass

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The Morality of Circumcision by Father John Dietzen

What is the morality of circumcision? The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that amputations and mutilations performed on innocent people without strictly therapeutic reasons are against the moral law.

Pope Pius XII taught that circumcision is morally permissible if it prevents a disease that cannot be countered any other way.

In spite of these and other church statements against circumcision through the centuries, I'm told there is no strict Catholic rule against the practice today. Why not? No medical association in the world today any longer says circumcision is therapeutic. (Ohio)

I'm not sure why not, but the fact is male circumcision generally just doesn't appear very much on the "radar screen" of Catholic moral teaching. Many major moral theology texts don't mention it. A notable except is "Medical Ethics," by Father Edwin Healy SJ (Loyal University Press), who holds that since routine circumcisions are not medically defensible they are morally objectionable.

A few observations may help explain. The practice of circumcision arose thousands of years ago and is prevalent in many cultures around the world. Nearly always it has religious or social significance, signifying full membership in the group and establishing one's social position in the society.

The first divine command to the Jews, for example, was that every male child be circumcised, symbolizing the covenant between God and Abraham (Gn 17).

After the famous confrontation between Paul and other leaders of the early church (Acts 15 and Galatians 2), Christians pretty much rejected the necessity of circumcision for becoming a believer in Christ.

The idea didn't entirely die, however. The theory that circumcision still held some spiritual benefits even for Christians, prompted at least some of the condemnations you speak of. The [Council of Vienne](#) (1311), for example, decreed that Christians should not be lured into Judaism or be circumcised for any reason.

The following century, the [Council of Florence](#) (1438-1435) ordered "all who glory in the name of Christian not to practice circumcision either before or after baptism, since whether or not they place their hope in it, it cannot possibly be observed without loss of eternal salvation."

Today, while nontherapeutic male circumcision remains common in some places, as a general practice it is forbidden in Catholic teaching for more basic reasons of [respect for](#)

[bodily integrity](#). 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" (N. 2297).

Elective circumcision clearly violates that standard. It is an amputation and mutilation, and, to my knowledge, and as you note, no significant medical group in the world defends it as having any therapeutic value. In 1999 the Council on Scientific Affairs of the American Medical Association stated that neonatal circumcision is nontherapeutic because no disease is present and no therapeutic treatment is required.

Modern Catholic Church documents do not deal explicitly with the morality of elective circumcision. The above basic principles, however, clearly render it immoral. It violates the bodily integrity of infant male children and unnecessarily deprives them of a part of their body that can protect the glans of the penis during infancy and serve at least a sexual function for adults.

My understanding from physicians is that circumcision rarely if ever arises as an ethical consideration. Usually it is requested by the parents for more social reasons such as, it's always been done in our family. In that case, the procedure might be carried out in some places rather routinely, even if it is not what the child needs and no curative or remedial reason renders it ethical.

Biographical note*

Father John James Dietzen, M.A., S.T.L., who is now retired from parish pastoral duties, has written a column for more than thirty years that is syndicated, distributed by the Catholic News Service, and carried in numerous Catholic publications across America.

Father Dietzen's background in the Catholic press, parish work, and in family life programs in and outside of his diocese qualify him for his role as "pastor in print." A native of Danville, Illinois, he studied at St. Bede College, Peru, Illinois, and at [St. Mary of the Lake Seminary](#) in Mundelein, Illinois, before his ordination to the priesthood for the Diocese of Peoria in June, 1954. He holds a Master of Arts degree in English, and Licentiate degree in Sacred Theology.

Father Dietzen's work as a priest includes 16 years as associate editor of *The Catholic Post*, weekly newspaper of the Peoria diocese, and service to the Catholic Press Association of the United States and Canada as secretary and member of the board of directors. In the same period, he was responsible for the Family Life programs in his diocese, and gave pre-marriage, marriage and family life education programs in many cities. He also conducted seminars on marriage for the armed forces in Alaska, Japan and the Philippine Islands, and gave retreats to high school students, men and women and married couples in many parts of the country.

Father Dietzen began writing The Question Box column for *The Catholic Post* in 1975; it proved popular and was soon accepted by National Catholic News Service for nationwide publication.

*Based on information in *The New Question Box: Catholic life in the '80s*. Peoria: Guildhall Publishers, 1983.

Circumcision Permanently Alters the Brain

The surgery subjected the infant to significant trauma.

Two of my physics professors at Queen's University (Dr. Stewart & Dr. McKee) were the original developers of Positron Emission Tomography (PET) for medical applications. They and a number of other Queen's physicists also worked on improving the accuracy of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) for observing metabolic activity within the human body.

As a graduate student working in the Dept. of Epidemiology, I was approached by a group of nurses who were attempting to organize a protest against male infant circumcision in Kingston General Hospital. They said that their observations indicated that babies undergoing the procedure were subjected to significant and inhumane levels of pain that subsequently adversely affected their behaviors. They said that they needed some scientific support for their position. It was my idea to use fMRI and/or PET scanning to directly observe the effects of circumcision on the infant brain.

The operator of the MRI machine in the hospital was a friend of mine, and he agreed to allow us to use the machine for research after normal operational hours. We also found a nurse who was under intense pressure by her husband to have her newborn son circumcised, and she was willing to have her son to be the subject of the study. Her goal was to provide scientific information that would eventually be used to ban male infant circumcision. Since no permission of the ethics committee was required to perform any routine male infant circumcision, we did not feel it was necessary to seek any permission to carry out this study.

We tightly strapped an infant to a traditional plastic "circumstraint" using Velcro restraints. We also completely immobilized the infant's head using standard surgical tape. The entire apparatus was then introduced into the MRI chamber. Since no metal objects could be used because of the high magnetic fields, the doctor who performed the surgery used a plastic bell with a sterilized obsidian bade to cut the foreskin. No anesthetic was used.

The baby was kept in the machine for several minutes to generate baseline data of the normal metabolic activity in the brain. This was used to compare to the data gathered during and after the surgery. Analysis of the MRI data indicated that the surgery subjected the infant to significant trauma. The greatest changes occurred in the limbic system concentrating in the amygdala and in the frontal and temporal lobes.

A neurologist who saw the results postulated that the data indicated that circumcision affected most intensely the portions of the victim's brain associated with reasoning, perception and emotions. Follow up tests on the infant one day, one week and one month after the surgery indicated that the child's brain never returned to its baseline configuration. In other words, the evidence generated by this research indicated that the brain of the circumcised infant was permanently changed by the surgery.

Our problems began when we attempted to publish our findings in the open medical literature. All of the participants in the research including myself were called before the hospital discipline committee and were severely reprimanded. We were told that while male circumcision was legal under all circumstances in Canada, any attempt to study the adverse effects of circumcision was strictly prohibited by the ethical regulations. Not only could we not publish the results of our research, but we also had to destroy all of our results. If we refused to comply, we were all threatened with immediate dismissal and legal action.

I would encourage anyone with access to fMRI and /or PET scanning machines to repeat our research as described above, confirm our results, and then publish the results in the open literature.

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