



DOCTORS OPPOSING CIRCUMCISION (D.O.C.)

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*“Fear, pain, crippling, disfigurement and humiliation are the classic ways to break the human spirit.
Circumcision includes them all.”*

30 January 2003

Mr James Welsh, Coordinator
Medical Office
International Secretariat
Amnesty International
1 Easton Street
London WC1X 0DW
United Kingdom

Re: The circumcision of male children

Dear Mr Welsh:

The web-page of the Health Professional Network, “Manual for Health Professional Network Groups,”¹ describes male circumcision as a “contentious issue.”¹ This page says, “AI follows international human rights law which has not, to this point, regarded non-medically-indicated circumcision of males as a violation of human rights.” This page is inaccurate on two points. Actually, only the non-therapeutic circumcision of male children is in contention.

Most parties, including Doctors Opposing Circumcision, believe that the circumcision of adult males is not a human rights violation, *provided* the adult male voluntarily grants consent for the excision of tissue *after* receiving full information about the nature of the tissue to be removed, the known risks, potential benefits, possible outcomes, and the same information for other treatment modalities, including the option of non-circumcision.

The second inaccurate statement is that human rights law has not “regarded non-medically indicated circumcision of males as a violation of human rights.” We believe that, in the case of children, non-medically indicated circumcision is, in fact, a violation of human rights.

A brief review of the medical literature is in order:

Male circumcision typically excises generous amounts of healthy skin and specialized protective sensory mucosa from the penis of the subject male – frequently more than 50 percent.² This tissue has numerous protective, immunological, sensory anatomical and physiological functions.^{3 4} Excision of this tissue degrades those functions.

The degrading of protection of the foreskin by circumcision causes meatitis, meatal ulcers, and meatal stenosis requiring further operation.⁵ These conditions are not seen in intact, non-circumcised boys. Circumcised boys also suffer from preputial adhesions.⁶

The degrading of immunological protection causes increased incidence of certain sexually transmitted diseases. Studies show circumcised men have a higher incidence of non-specific urethritis,⁷ genital warts,⁸ gonorrhoea,⁹ and syphilis,⁹ with a resulting degrading of health.

The degrading of sexual sensitivity causes degraded sexual function, which is verified by three recent surveys and studies.^{10 11 12}

There can be no doubt, therefore, that circumcision is a degrading procedure to the individual. The UN *Declaration on Torture* defines degrading procedures as a violation of human rights.¹³ Degrading treatment is also a violation of the UN *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.¹⁴ The excision of healthy human tissue described above is also a violation of the right to security of the person.¹⁵

We now call your attention to the *European Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine* (1997). That convention entered into force on December 1, 1999; fifteen European nations now are states-party to that instrument of international law.

Article 20(1) provides:

No organ or tissue removal may be carried out on a person who does not have the capacity to consent under Article 5.¹⁶

Children lack the capacity to consent, so this article prohibits the excision and removal of tissue by circumcision as described above. Circumcision of male children, therefore, clearly is a violation of this instrument of international law.

We also call your attention to the deaths of youths in South Africa secondary to circumcision. Circumcisions are carried out there as a tribal ritual initiation into manhood. A recent newspaper report listed 45 deaths this year in Eastern Province alone.¹⁷ It seems strained to argue that a death caused by a ritual circumcision does not violate the right to life provided by international human rights law.¹⁸ Circumcision, therefore, violates the right to life in some cases.

Even children enjoy a right of privacy under international law.¹⁹ The right of privacy is the right to personal autonomy.²⁰ The non-therapeutic circumcision of a child by consent of another person violates that human right of personal autonomy.

Children also enjoy the right to choose their own religion.²¹ The imposition of a circumcision in furtherance of another person's religious beliefs violates the child's right to choose his religion.²² Some religions, such as Sikhism, do not believe in cutting. A circumcision violates a child's human rights under Article 14 of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.²²

We would also call attention to the four Geneva Conventions (1949). These conventions contain a common Article 3. Paragraph 1 provides:

To this end, the following acts are and shall remain prohibited at any time and in any place whatsoever with respect to the above-mentioned persons:

(a) Violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture;

(c) Outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment;²³

The degrading nature of circumcision, as described above makes it a violation of 1(a) and 1(c) of Article 3 when carried out in time of war. The *Final Report on the Former Yugoslavia* specifically recognizes circumcision as a violation of international law.²⁴

In closing, we would like to point out that the Norwegian Council on Bioethics of the Norwegian Medical Association has determined that the non-therapeutic circumcision of male children violates paragraph one of the Norwegian *Code of Medical Ethics*.²³ Paragraph one calls for "a doctor to base his practice on respect for human rights..."²⁴

We at Doctors Opposing Circumcision believe that, after you study the referenced articles and other sources, you will be in a better position to advise the International Secretariat and the national sections on this matter when it is discussed again.

Yours faithfully,

George Hill
Executive Secretary

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