

Real and Imagined Motives for Neo-Natal Circumcision

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People should be particularly careful about having a medical intervention that is not strictly required to maintain life and good health. When looking back at the history of healthcare, it is easy to find practices that used to be recommended but now are no longer because they proved to cause more harm than good. Examples include administering syrup of ipecac after a poisoning or removing asymptomatic tonsils. The mental health field, meanwhile, has subjected people to some of the most sordid practices of all, including shock treatments and lobotomies. Going back even further reveals a horror show of leechings, bloodlettings, and trepannings, and many more people died from such interventions than were saved by them. All this begs the question of what procedures of today will wind up in the same ash heap of medical malfeasance. Most likely circumcision will be among them, and considering how rates of circumcision have been falling in recent decades, it seems to already be getting shoveled onto the pile.

People in the past did the best they could with very limited medical knowledge, and supposedly things are much more advanced today. However, in reality, medicine is still shockingly primitive. This is evidenced by the fact that doctors cannot duplicate even one cell of the human body, which shows they have hardly even begun to understand it, and that they cannot heal even the smallest scratch, instead at best supporting the body's innate ability to heal. Aside from certain infections, certain cancers, vitamin deficiencies, and some other issues related to weight, diet, and lifestyle, essentially no diseases can truly be cured, but instead we mainly rely on taking treatments indefinitely to ameliorate their effects, if anything can be done at all. The cutting edge of medicine is a blunt and ragged blade, giving us procedures that entail jabbing people with needles, irradiating them, cutting them open and sewing them closed, excising parts of the body, cutting pieces off one area and grafting them somewhere else, implanting organs from cadavers, screwing broken bones back together, cutting out whole joints and replacing them with metal ones, drilling holes in the teeth or just pulling them out, and introducing all kinds of chemicals into the body, hoping they affect the problem more than they screw up everything else. This is not a criticism of any of these practices per se as the limits of current technology often mean they are the only way to address disease, but, to say the least, such a crude state of affairs should make anyone hesitant about advice to hand over a newborn to have part of his genitals chopped off.

Supposedly there are many health benefits to circumcision, and supposedly the best time for it is shortly after birth. In this, we are supposed to trust the still rudimentary understanding of a doctor who says the foreskin should come off over the wisdom of billions of years of evolution that says it should stay there. Nevertheless, there may well be some merit to arguments for the benefits of circumcision, and yet it does not make a bit of difference. Any body part could eventually become diseased, even lethally so, but that is no reason to start cutting things off preemptively because such has obvious negative effects itself. Also, as with any surgery, there are risks because when cutting into the body, many things can go wrong, like damage to nerves or blood vessels and exposure of the body to infection. With regard to circumcision specifically, if too much tissue is removed, sexual function can be impaired, and arguably it is to some degree in all cases as the loss of the foreskin reduces sensitivity, at the very least, amputated tissue can no longer feel. It is easy to say that complications are rare, to claim that it is riskier not to do it than to do it, when you are not one of the minority who suffered complications. Certainly, the men who wound up having their gender reassigned due to a botched

circumcision or the parents who suddenly lost their baby due to that supposedly safe procedure would have rather risked phimosis or a urinary tract infection and just left the foreskin alone. Imagine the deranged thinking of parents who have a healthy newborn, and instead of falling to their knees in gratitude that they dodged the countless ways pregnancy and birth can go horribly wrong, they instead essentially think “Let’s risk it all and cut something off.”

Unless there is some immediate risk that compels intervention, the ethical choice is always to leave the body the way it is where a non-consenting person is concerned, and a baby’s bodily integrity should clearly win out over the presumed advantages of circumcision. To create a definite injury now to prevent an injury that may or may not happen perhaps years or decades from now, that is not necessarily serious or could be treated in its own right, or that could still happen in spite of the intervention, is just not a tenable position ethically or logically. When he is older, the baby can decide for himself, even if some of the potential benefit is lost at that point. If circumcision is so beneficial, it should still be worth doing, but if the calculus of the matter shifts against the procedure with time anyway, why bother doing it in the first place? Also, the fact that most men do not get circumcised later in life shows that when given the choice for themselves, most reject circumcision, making its practice on infants even more dubious. People who argue along the lines that a procedure should be carried out now when it cannot be resisted because the patient will not undergo it when there is a choice inadvertently reveals their sinister true intent: to force their view of how things should be on us all, to leave it literally as an indelible mark on the body of at least every male. If the only way to make circumcision widespread is to force it on the helpless, it is way past the time for a total reevaluation of the practice.

Probably the most common pseudo-medical reason given to justify circumcision relates to hygiene. The foreskin is said to be inherently unclean, but that sounds more like a cultural bias than a genuine health concern. An easy way to expose this bias and highlight the tragic ridiculousness of circumcision is to apply the reasoning used to justify it to other parts of the body. The human body and biology in general are filthy: consider sweat, excreta, the secretions of the skin, blackheads, and so on. How much bacteria can be found in the folds of the skin or clinging to the teeth? Maybe extractions are in order. How much dirt and grease does the hair trap and hold, how prone is it to being infested with parasites? So do the proponents of circumcision call for every baby’s head to be kept shaved? That would actually be much less malignant than circumcision because it is at least reversible. The foreskin is a very small part of the overall filthiness of the body, and the answer to that is soap and water, not surgery. In a similar vein, consider the toenails. Their purpose is to protect the tips of the toes, but that function is no longer necessary because we generally wear shoes. At the same time, dirt and lint easily accumulate under the nails, so they can be considered unclean as well. The toenails are prone to fungal infection that is notoriously difficult to cure, and they are also prone to become ingrown, which can result in serious pain and dangerous infections, requiring surgery to correct. Therefore, by the reasoning of circumcision advocates, it would be appropriate to rip out all the toenails of every infant.

Many commonly asserted benefits of circumcision are clearly specious, which should make everyone skeptical of the motives of its proponents. One example is the claim that circumcision reduces the risk of sexually transmitted disease. Maybe it does, but how is it even remotely appropriate to talk about that where an infant is concerned? Such an argument assumes knowledge of how the newborn will someday live his sex life. Maybe he will be celibate, maybe he will be strictly monogamous, maybe he will diligently take precautions, in which case whatever relevance the STD argument may have had disappears. A variation of the argument is that male circumcision also prevents STDs in women. Again,

this may or may not be true, but what does it have to do with newborns? That claim really seems to be a propaganda tactic, spinning the issue to be about women and disingenuously making opposition to circumcision seem to be a selfish disregard for their health. Ultimately, it is up to each individual to weigh for herself the risks of sexual contact with a given person. Yet another variation is that the majority of women supposedly prefer circumcised men, though again, this has no relevance to newborns and also smacks of an emotional appeal, offering absolutely no ethical or medical substance. All this also connects with another line of propaganda such that opposing male circumcision minimizes the even greater harm of female genital mutilation, though obviously we can reject both forms of mutilation without minimizing either one.

There are a number of other examples of poor excuses for circumcision. One is that the foreskin is “just extra skin.” But even if that were true, it would not change the fact that it is a normal part of the body, though in actuality, the foreskin is a rather complex structure, like basically any part of the body, even including actual plain skin. Another example is that the only use for the foreskin is in gay sex acts. However, this is just a cheap and transparent slur, exploiting homophobia to deter resistance to circumcision. The true sentiment undergirding it is that “If you oppose circumcision, you must be a fag.” There are also attempts to muddy the issue by conflating it with other medical matters. For instance, one might ask that if it is wrong to circumcise an infant, is it also wrong to give vaccines? It may or may not be, it depends on the circumstances, but that is beyond the scope of this essay. Of all the routine medical procedures performed on infants, the amputation of healthy, normal tissue, carrying out a body modification, undertaking purely elective surgery, is in a class by itself. Circumcision is probably closer to another disgusting practice, having a baby’s or young child’s ears pierced, that is, punching holes through the earlobes in order to hang decorations, essentially to satisfy the parents’ vanity, than it is to vaccination. A final example is that babies supposedly do not remember the pain caused by the procedure. Maybe so, but they can still feel it in the moment, and putting a baby in restraints, crushing one of the most sensitive parts of his body in a clamp, and slicing it off with no anesthetic is a pretty brutal affair. Would it be ethical in any other circumstance to brutalize someone if you knew the memory of it would later be lost? Moreover, even if the pain is not remembered consciously, maybe the effects of the trauma continue to emanate from the subconscious, to say nothing of the psychological harm that can potentially be caused by later realization of the mutilation itself.

Genital mutilation is a heinous crime, most of all when committed against the helpless, so it has always required some kind of excuse to justify it. It started out as a rite of passage or a religious ritual in some cultures. For the supporters of circumcision, the religious element conveniently makes it partially immune to criticism because anyone who does so risks being labeled a bigot, even though such ritual mutilation in any other context would be a felony. Later on, with the prudishness of the Victorian Era, circumcision became a way to deter masturbation. And then, as the world became more scientifically-oriented, circumcision mutated yet again to become a means to prevent various diseases. It just seems very odd and implausible for the same procedure to legitimately play all these roles, for it to somehow shape-shift to fit the spirit of the times and yet never change itself, for superstition and objective analysis both to happen to arrive at circumcision as a legitimate practice. Usually, when the reasons for their actions are discredited, people acting openly and in good faith will change their behavior, not make up new reasons to justify continuing it.

Because they are so disposable, many of the superficial justifications can be dismissed simply as a smokescreen obscuring the real motive. As for what that motive is, Sigmund Freud believed circumcision was actually an expression of the subconscious wish of fathers to castrate their sons, and

whether or not this is precisely what lies at the root of the matter, it seems likely that some kind of sexual perversion would be found there. Of all the not-strictly-necessary parts of the body that could be cut off, it is interesting that such a practice falls to the genitalia. Why not the ritual removal of the nails or ear lobes instead? This by itself suggests a sexual motive. A further hint is that circumcision is rooted in religious practice, and religion is notoriously hung up on denouncing, restricting, and controlling sexuality. Moreover, even some of the justifications explicitly given for circumcision, like discouraging masturbation or preventing STDs, are overtly sexual, pointing again to a cause that is based in sexuality. Considering that the issue is the mutilation of the genitals, it follows that the cause would be based in a perverted sexuality.

As far as other actual reasons, the corrupting force of money and social inertia should also be considered. As with any matter concerning healthcare today, the money-grubbing butchery for which the system that is supposed to “do no harm” has become so notorious cannot be ignored. If circumcision is routinely performed on most male newborns, that is an enormous and reliable stream of revenue for the hospitals, which are driven to make a profit just like any other business, and because that is the way things have been done for a long time, there is even less incentive to just stop doing it. Part of this inertia also comes from social pressures. To some, failing to opt for circumcision indicates a negligent parent. For others, it may be easier to let the practice continue as though it were normal than to face the true nature of it. How can a doctor who has perhaps mutilated thousands of babies in his career come around and say that it actually was mutilation and stop? He has to either keep going or implicitly admit that he is a monster. Likewise, if a father who was himself circumcised rejects circumcision for his son on the grounds that it is mutilation, he essentially has to admit that he himself is mutilated. But if he has his son circumcised, he gets to stay normal, so the practice carries on another generation. In the same vein, looking into the responses of the public to the topic, one will find that some people really put up a fanatical and mean-spirited defense of circumcision, and this smacks of defensiveness, suggesting an attempt to obscure their true thinking, to prevent even themselves from seeing it. How can being so emotionally invested in wanting to continue cutting off a part of babies’ genitals possibly be interpreted as a sign of healthy thinking, especially when it is so much simpler and more rational just to stop it? And yet to these individuals, somehow the sadomasochism suggested by the serial mutilation of infants is not deranged, opposing it is. One may point out that those opposing circumcision can be fanatical too, but alleged fanaticism in that case is much more reasonable, since it is an attempt to resist something as heinous as genital mutilation. By attempting to spin that into some kind of perversion, what the supporters of circumcision really are doing is trying to distract from their own.