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Circumcision is a common surgery but what of the ethics?

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An American father adopts an Asian daughter. He loves her just the way she is, except for her eyes. They make her look sleepy. So he, a plastic surgeon himself, arranges for a blepharoplasty, minimal surgery that will make her eyes rounder. It's just a small cosmetic procedure, but the results are stunning, and the father is happy. Now his daughter can be a part of her Caucasian family with eyes that approximate theirs.

Does the prospect of the well-meaning father shaping his daughter's eyes (a true story) make you uncomfortable? If it does, what happens when I draw a comparison between "Asian eye surgery" and male circumcision? Do you protest, as some of my students did, that they're not the same thing? If so, why is circumcision different. Is it, unlike eye rounding, medically necessary or beneficial? Is it different because a scalpel is applied to the penis and not the eyes? Is it unique because, unlike eye rounding, circumcision has roots in the Hebrew Bible as a covenant between Abraham and his god?

Circumcision is the most common surgery in America, but it raises important questions about the rights of children, parental control, and the duty of doctors to do no harm. For some, these questions are not abstract. Consider the Intactivist Movement, whose members believe, at the broadest level, that humans should be allowed to make their own decisions about their bodies. They envision a world in which no child, girl or boy, is mutilated in the name of "culture, religion, profit, or parental preference." At Union Square in Manhattan this month, the side of an Intactivist truck displayed photographs of young men holding photographs of themselves as children, along with the words "Circumcision: I Did Not Consent." The movement has momentum. Later this year, a feature-length documentary directed by Brendon Marotta called "American Circumcision" is due for release. Its purpose: "to start the national conversation our culture needs to have about circumcision."

What's the big deal, you might think. Shouldn't Muslim and Jewish communities — and millions of American families — be allowed to shape their children as they please? Maybe you think circumcision is a vital cultural practice. Like clitoridectomy, it shows you are part of a group.

The truth is, there is risk in circumcision and little benefit. No medical society in the world recommends the procedure as necessary. None of the data in its favor are conclusive, but the risks are very real. For centuries now, advocates have made claims for circumcision. For medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides, circumcision damages the penis just enough to “counteract excessive lust.” In 1860, *The Lancet*, a medical journal, promoted it as a preventative to masturbation. Today, some say urinary tract infections are fewer in circumcised boys (who rarely have such infections), as is penile cancer (a rare condition). Brian Morris, archenemy of the prepuce, even claims a foreskin will predispose you to stroke and heart attack.

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Circumcision is a social surgery that many American parents agree to. In the rest of the world, circumcised men are the minority. Most European parents don’t see the point of needlessly mutilating their boys’ erogenous tissue. Babies have died or contracted herpes or other infections. Not surprisingly, even American parents are increasingly deciding not to circumcise.

A defenseless infant cannot consent to a permanent alteration of his penis. We wouldn’t tattoo a baby, so why would we cut off a part of his body? Parents routinely expose their boys to the actual harm of surgery for cosmetic or cultural reasons — an unnecessary surgery that is covered in New York, at \$500 to \$1,000 dollars a slice, by Medicaid.

Physicians have a duty not to harm children. Parents have a duty to regard them, as law professor John A. Robertson’s put it, not as “owners of their children’s personhood,” but as “trustees of their children’s separate welfare.”

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