

A Cleaner Wiener?
or
How I became an Intactivist

I never really thought about my foreskin until I met Betty. I never thought about it because I don't have one. Like millions of other men and boys around the world, and especially in western cultures, I had my foreskin sliced off within a few days of being born. It was common practice in the 1950's and 60's, when as many as 85% of American males were routinely circumcised at birth. As of 2009, the figure has dropped to about 35%. For some people, that's still too high.

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My phone rang one evening in early 2004. It was Betty Sperlich calling to introduce herself. She had seen me perform a concert the year before. She had an idea for a short musical that would tell the story of a mother and father struggling over the decision of whether or not to circumcise their baby boy. But she wasn't a musician, and thus needed a collaborator.

It was my song, "Don't Use Your Penis for a Brain," which made Betty think that I was the one who could write songs about the subject. The show would be titled *It's A Boy!* and she wanted accordion music to give it a "circus-y" feel. In fact, she had even invented a new genre; she wanted to call it a "circus opera," and create a stage show with a unicyclist, a trapeze artist, giant puppets and a knife juggler. I was intrigued.

Betty had never written anything of the sort before. She was a labor and delivery nurse at the local hospital and had seen too many babies being unnecessarily "cut" over the years. Finally, she and all of her fellow nurses, in a stunning display of solidarity, signed a letter to the hospital administration refusing to assist with any more circumcisions.

They became "conscientious objectors to male circumcision" and came out publicly against it in the local paper and on TV. They wrote and printed informational materials, formed a non-profit called Nurses for the Rights of the Child (a local branch of the national NOCIRC), and a sympathetic filmmaker (Barry Ellsworth) even made a documentary about their efforts titled, "The Nurses of St. Vincent: Saying NO to Circumcision."

The more I learned about these women, the more I saw that they were way ahead of their time, and that they were, in a word, heroes. The irony (and the beauty) of a group of women defending what is essentially a man's right was also not lost on me. Later I would learn that there were plenty of men involved in what is actually a

national movement. But in the meantime, I saw that these nurses were in a strategic position to make a difference, and I was proud to be associated with them.

The penis is actually an internal organ, and the foreskin is there to protect it and provide natural lubrication. Without it, the loss of moisture to the glans causes the surface to toughen, similar to a callus, a process known as keratinization. Further, there are thousands and thousands of nerve endings in the foreskin itself, so if you remove most of it, it stands to reason that some measure of sensitivity is going to be sacrificed. All of this parallels the way in which female circumcision is intended to reduce, or even eliminate a woman's sexual pleasure. Surprisingly, this seems to be lost among some doctors.

In the sex-phobic Victorian era, circumcision was encouraged among non-Jews with the argument that it helped to discourage masturbation and to temper the male libido. As sexual mores loosened in the 20th century, that rationale became outdated. But once a procedure is quick and profitable and becomes part of a medical economy, such as a hospital, it's difficult to get doctors to stop doing it. Instead, some of them began citing hygiene and disease prevention in order to justify the practice.

Often parents are seduced by what Betty referred to as the "cleaner wiener" propaganda, no matter what the statistics are. A few doctors will even go so far as to call it a prophylactic against HIV. They might quote you studies that for some reason are usually done in countries whose medical resources and hygiene standards are nowhere near what they are in North America, Western Europe and Australia. At the same time, statistics show that while the US has the highest rate of circumcision after Israel and Saudi Arabia, it also has the highest rate of HIV transmission, which more than suggests that circumcision is not helping the problem.

My own personal experience backs this up: I've lost many friends and several boyfriends to AIDS. All of them were circumcised. Obviously, it is dangerous for men to believe this myth. Such a false sense of security could prove fatal.

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Betty told me a lot about her experiences as a labor and delivery nurse. She had seen the joyful births of hundreds of babies, and in the cases of the baby boys, she found that the same dramas unfolded again and again when it came to the question of circumcision.

"Most of the time it's the father who wants it done," she said, "A lot of them say 'I want my son to look like me.' How ridiculous is that? The idea that a boy is going to look like his father just because they're both circumcised? How many people are going

to notice *that*?"

I had to agree, it was ludicrous, and reeked of male ego and pride.

"Then there's the 'locker room' argument'," she continued. "They're afraid their son will feel self-conscious or be made fun of in the locker room if his penis looks different. Does that really happen?"

"I imagine it might, but I've never witnessed it," I said.

"And sometimes," Betty continued, "it's the mother who wants to do it. Some of them are not comfortable with the idea that they'll have to keep their baby's foreskin clean, or with having to teach them how to wash it themselves when they are a little older."

"It's not like it's difficult to clean, right?" I respond. "I can say from experience that little boys hardly need to be encouraged to play with their pee-pees in the shower."

Betty also told me that many doctors will claim that they only perform circumcisions "as a service" to parents who request it, thereby abdicating any ethical responsibility. "But think about it," she added, "If any other normal part of a baby's body was amputated, no matter who requested it, the doctor would probably end up in jail."

While I was writing *It's A Boy!* I talked about the subject to everyone I knew and some people I didn't know. I noticed immediately that people tended to have very strong opinions about it, but virtually no information. The responses of some gay men, whom I naively assumed would agree with the nurses, often surprised me.

A lot of them thought circumcision was no big deal, and a few of them had nothing to say except that they preferred a circumcised penis. Their shallow context disappointed me; they could only see it as a question of which kind of penis they would prefer their partner to have. It's fine to have a preference here, but it's completely beside the point.

When I spoke to heterosexual men about it, I sensed a certain resistance, and it took me a while to understand it. In our macho American culture, it is often difficult for a man to admit that he's been a victim or that he's been violated in any way, as is often the case with male rape. It's not really a stretch to perceive circumcision as a violation of one's body.

A few other men surprised me by comparing it to *female* circumcision, and insisted, "Now that's *much* worse."

And indeed, the practice of amputating parts of a young girl's clitoris and labia, which still occurs legally in over two dozen African countries, parts of Asia and the Middle East, is barbaric, with no other objective than to control women and their sexuality. Moreover, it has all sorts of health risks including infertility and fatal bleeding, and needless to say there are no known health benefits. Similarly, *intersex* genital mutilation (performed on intersex babies to conform them to the male and female sex binary) runs all those risks and many more.

However, unlike male circumcision and intersex genital mutilation, female circumcision (also known as female genital mutilation, or female genital cutting) is already outlawed in the United States and most western countries. In places where it's still legal, Amnesty International is on the case.

But is it *worse* than male circumcision? A better question might be: what value is there in saying that one is worse than the other, or that we should care more about one than the other? They are all different forms of the same thing: genital mutilation, and they have a lot in common: 1) they're both done without consent, 2) they're both religiously and/or culturally sanctioned, and 3) they're both medically unnecessary (except in extremely rare cases).

Finally, I got to work writing about it instead of trying to talk to people about it, remembering, once again, that the song is my sword.

Out of Betty's many labor and delivery room stories and anecdotes, we created songs. Songs like "If Only," the lament of a young mother who wants nothing more than to protect her baby from the doctor's knife, but instead surrenders to his recommendation and the wishes of her husband:

*If only I could embrace you
If only they wouldn't deface you
If only I could defend you
My darling boy
But it's not my thing
It's a guy thing
So I'll let you go*

Or the absurd calypso number "A Cleaner Wiener," a doctor's sales pitch to befuddled parents, citing just some of the ills that circumcision, at one time or another, was believed to cure:

*Circumcision, no decision!
It's protection from infection*

*Masturbation, infatuation
AIDS, cancer, syphilis, insanity and bedwetting*

Another song gives voice to a young man's rage at his parents for sacrificing him to a "well-paid butcher."

*One day old, a helpless baby
You let a sadist mutilate me.
You should have been the ones to save me
Mom and Dad, you betrayed me*

There's a tango duet which examines the power dynamic between a doctor who threatens:

*You're just a nurse, way out of line
Scaring the parents and causing mothers to cry*

And a nurse who retorts with:

*I won't be silenced, not one more time
Won't be complicit while you commit a crime*

We also wrote an intentionally repetitive, brainless march called "Take It Like A Man," in which a father insists over and over that since "he's circumcised and he's fine," why shouldn't his son suffer the same initiation:

*Don't cry son, take it like a man
Your father did, so I know that you can*

I assembled a cast of singers and musicians to perform the show as a concert, and it was recorded in front of a live audience at the Santa Fe playhouse in June 2005. In 2006 we took the entire cast to Seattle, including a real knife juggler whose hair-raising performance representing the very act of circumcision made for a nail-biting finale. A CD was released concurrently, and one reviewer, completely missing the pro-choice, human rights aspect, referred to the material as "anti-circumcision propaganda." At first, that bothered me, because I thought it was dismissive, but then I thought, well, maybe it *is* propaganda. And maybe, *it's about time.*

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