

BURLINGTON / HEALTH / U.S. POLITICS

How Dare You! Protesters Exclaim

POSTED BY MOLLY WALSH ON MON, SEP 28, 2015 AT 6:07 PM

"My penis is just fine," shouted a young male motorist Monday at the busy intersection of Dorset Street and Williston Road in South Burlington before screeching off.

Was someone asking after the health of his sex organ? Sort of. The man, presumably circumcised, was responding in loud disagreement to a clutch of roadside activists protesting circumcision. They dressed to stop traffic in all-white clothing with blood-red patches over their crotches and signs showing babies and bearing slogans such as: "How Dare You Cut His Penis!"



Franny Max, left, and David Hubert at the Bloodstained Men & Their Friends protest against circumcision.

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Circumcision is performed on males, typically when they are newborns, and entails cutting the foreskin from the penis.

Concern about the practice and shifting recommendations from public health experts contributed to a drop in rates of circumcision in the U.S. between 1979 and 2010. It fell from 65 to 58 percent of male newborns over that time, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Now the rate appears to be climbing back, possibly in response to research showing that circumcision can help reduce the spread of HIV and other STDs. Three years ago the American Academy of Pediatrics revised its position on circumcision to offer stronger support. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has also chimed in, saying the benefits outweigh the risks.

The anti-circ squad on the streets Monday remains dead-set against the practice. "It's really barbaric and harmful and babies scream like hell," said Franny Max of Montreal, as she stood in a white outfit waving a sign at traffic.

None of her four sons has been circumcised, nor have the males in her extended family, Max said. She acknowledged the research about STD transmission, but said condoms, not circumcision, are the way to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

She and other anti-circumcision protestors said the procedure causes pain, risks infection, reduces sexual pleasure and reduces penis size. "If you cut something, you make it smaller not bigger," Max said. "If you cut a loaf of bread, you

have a smaller loaf of bread.”

Max started protesting circumcision after one of her sons, then a baby, was in the hospital intensive care unit for a health problem, and she observed the procedure being done on newborns. “I saw other babies having vivisection basically, and it was horrible,” she said.

One of the props at the protest Monday was a plastic baby doll with two surgical clamps attached to its penis and a



Protesters used a plastic doll as a prop Monday.

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sign asking, “Was this you?” Circumcision advocates say the pain is temporary, infection risk is low and any reduction in penis size is not noticeable. The CDC says studies around sexual sensation are mixed.

The protest is part of a campaign by a national organization called Bloodstained Men & Their Friends. Some of the protesters were heading to Portland, Maine and other locations in the northeast after the stop in the Burlington area.

If circumcision is worthwhile, then boys can choose to have the procedure once they are adults, many of the protesters said. Harry Guiremand says he views his parents as “incompetent” for having him circumcised as a baby.

“Why didn’t anyone protect me?” he asked. Guiremand, who is from Hawaii, is on the road protesting the issue so future generations of boys are not subjected to what he sees as a brutal procedure. “It’s up to me, it’s up to us, to protect them.”

The fake-blood-stained get-ups help bring eyes to the issue, Guiremand added. “It catches peoples’ attention. They can’t look away.”

Most of the eight or so protesters were from outside Vermont. The exceptions were Amanda Fortier of Barre Town and Erin Langevin of Monkton, who came with their uncircumcised 3-year-old sons. The tots played with toy trucks on the ground as their moms waved signs.

Circumcision is wrong on many levels, including the baby’s lack of choice in the decision, Langevin said. “You’re forever changing their bodies, and they had no say in it.”

An earlier version of this article in one section incorrectly stated Franny Max’s name.

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