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## A 'right' parents shouldn't have: Ending circumcision, Part Two



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PHOTO BY LIV BRUCE /ON UNSPLASH

**T**he intensity of my grueling 35-hour-long labor is eclipsed by a joy beyond description.

I rest upright in the hospital bed and cradle my newborn son in my arms. He sleeps and I am transformed. His perfect, tiny features; his soft skin; his newness: All of this incomprehensibly catapults my being into a limitless love.

The room is quiet. My husband is out with my sister taking a walk. Peace descends. I watch my newborn son breathe.

Then, a nurse knocks on the door. “Hi. How are you? I have a few papers to go over with you before you go home,” she states, walking briskly into the room.

In America today, only one sex is protected from forced genital cutting. After all, that is what the circumcision of children is -- forced. There is no way a minor can give informed or meaningful consent to the elective procedure.

“OK,” I slowly reply, struggling to shift my attention to hospital protocol.

The nurse pulls up a chair. She takes out her pen and the questions commence. Who is our pediatrician? Do we want to authorize a hepatitis B vaccine? Did the lactation consultant come by?

I watch her check off her to-do list. Then, without looking up at me, she asks, “Do you want to have your son circumcised?”

I look at my little boy, not even 12 hours old.

Do I want this nurse to take my newborn away from me, expose his privates, strap his arms and legs onto a “best-selling” circumstraint board and be witness to his agony while his foreskin is forcibly separated and cut from the glans of his penis?

My god.

I instinctively hold my son closer to my breast. I search the nurse’s face for any sign of emotion, any sense of the magnitude of her inquiry.

Yes, as the parent of a minor, I act as medical proxy. But this power isn’t unlimited. If my child were a girl, no American nurse would even think to ask such a question. But for boys?

While the cutting of boy genitals has yet to be criminalized, I firmly assert that I have no moral right to authorize this painful elective surgery -- too often performed without anesthesia. Less than 20 years ago, 96 percent of circumcisions were performed without any pain relief at all.

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**Did you miss part one of 'Ending Circumcision'?**

Click here to read Ending circumcision, Part One: The case for extending legal protections to America's boys

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A 1997 study set up to determine the effectiveness of anesthesia on circumcision was quickly terminated. Why? Those being cut without pain medication suffered far too much trauma. Today, pain medication -- offering partial relief -- is more common but still far from universally employed.

Even if the procedure were completely painless, who am I to sculpt and mold my son's penis? Who am I to authorize the surgical removal of the most erogenous part of my son's genitals for religious, cultural or aesthetic preferences? Outside of pressing medical need, authorizing the circumcision of boys or girls is not a "right" any parent should have.

I answer the nurse's question with clarity: "No, absolutely not."

She looks up at me. I look into her eyes. There is a pause. She softly smiles and nods her head in affirmation.

## A boy's right

*"He doesn't have rights. His penis is my penis until he's 18."*

*-- Facebook post by a pro-circumcising parent*

As a scholar of religion and philosophy, I follow with interest the debates within Islam, Christianity and Judaism regarding the practice of circumcision. No religion is monolithic, and there are those on both sides of the issue who present emotionally charged arguments either affirming or condemning genital cutting.

I am not a Muslim, Christian or Jew -- so I leave it to the adherents of these respected faiths to wrestle with this issue internally. However, I am a citizen of the United States, founded upon ethical principles that draw inspiration from, but are independent of, these Abrahamic traditions.

In America today, only one sex is protected from forced genital cutting. After all, that is what the circumcision of children is -- forced. There is no way a minor can give informed or meaningful consent to the elective procedure. Whether performed for religious, cultural or aesthetic reasons, around 55 percent of American parents today are literally authorizing the irreversible carving of their preference onto the bodies of their sons. This choice impacts the future sex lives of their boys -- as well as the future sex lives of their sons' partners.

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We affirm religious freedom in the United States, but this freedom isn't unlimited. Our rights to express faithful convictions end when acting upon such convictions violates the personal autonomy of our fellow citizens, even when these citizens are our children. Dr. Alexandre T. Rotta, chief of pediatric critical care at University Hospitals in Cleveland, argues circumcision is "an egregious violation of personal autonomy and medical ethics."

Rotta came to oppose circumcision after witnessing the damage and death that resulted from circumcision complications requiring his expert, emergency care. Corrective surgeries resulting from botched circumcisions account for a significant percentage of all pediatric penile surgeries, according to pediatric urologist Adrienne Carmack, M.D. She writes, "I found that half of the surgeries were not necessary to resolve any impending threat to health and wouldn't have been needed had the child been left alone in the first place."

Legal recourse exists for parents if their sons are mistakenly or poorly cut. In fact, lawyers specialize in representing parents who find themselves heartsick after a circumcision gone wrong. But why not provide American boys with legal protection before the act? Why are boys exempt from the right to genital integrity in America?

Rotta continues: "As a pediatrician, I am deeply troubled by this form of government-endorsed mutilation of children, fragile human beings who will forever be robbed of the right to make an informed decision on such a deeply personal matter, carrying irreversible consequences."

## Brother K

"By design, we are high-visibility," states Brother K. "On a good day, tens of thousands of people see us."

Admired for his wit, kindness and dogged determination to end the cutting of boys in America, Brother K is a modern-day Moses-like figure for intactivism.

Brother K first donned his iconic white attire marked with a red acrylic-painted crotch as a protest against circumcision in November 2012. Two events catapulted his longtime intactivism into this new, bold, public protest. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) had released its 2012 policy statement arguing the benefits of infant male genital cutting outweigh the risks, and Brother K successfully had finished supporting his daughter through graduate school.

It was time. Intactivism became his life's work.

Brother K wasn't alone in condemning the AAP. Respected Canadian, Australian and European pediatricians and pediatric urologists responded with profound criticism to the 2012 AAP policy statement. In fact, dozens of European pediatricians collaborated to compose their own report claiming the AAP policy represented the cultural bias of a society that financially benefits from, and unscientifically affirms the practice of, genital cutting. The so-called "medical benefits" of infant male circumcision were countered with the compelling example of European life. HIV rates, in addition to the rates of other diseases said to be halted through cutting, are lower in Europe than in the U.S., and nearly all European men are intact.



*(Brother K protesting. Bloodstained Men & Their Friends/For PhillyVoice)*

In 2012, Brother K protested alone. In October 2013, he completed a solo seven-city, seven-day tour. It wasn't long before those noting his courage joined him. Admired for his wit, kindness and dogged determination to end the cutting of boys in America, Brother K is a modern-day Moses-like figure for intactivism.

Today, Brother K's organization, the Bloodstained Men & Their Friends, is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) with an active website, social media presence and press manager. This weekend, the Bloodstained Men & Their Friends will be joining dozens of national and local intactivist groups to protest at the AAP convention in Washington D.C. Their iconic images of bloodstained outcry will be hard to miss.

Due to the absence of social context relating to genital cutting, many American men are not even aware they have been cut. Brother K has met circumcised men who believe their penis reflects the way they were born.

“We have a wound under our clothes and we are showing the wound on the outside,” Brother K explains. He believes this is why their protests “are so powerful and disturbing to people.”

Brother K notes the practice of cutting male newborns in hospitals outside of any social ceremony, context or ritual is new in circumcision history. At least those who are cut in rituals can project meaning and a sense of loyalty to a group onto the experience. Brother K recalls the story of a Jewish man who told him: “Every time I take a leak and look at my penis, I am reminded that I am committed to being a better person.”

“No one who is circumcised in a hospital would have this thought,” Brother K asserts. “We are cutting infant boys and sacrificing a body part to nothing.”

Due to the absence of social context relating to genital cutting, many American men are not even aware they have been cut. Brother K has met circumcised men who believe their penis reflects the way they were born.

“We are living in a nation of wounded men who think they are normal,” he laments. “I lay the blame on doctors. Parents would not have created this nightmare.”

## The case to criminalize

American statutory, constitutional and common law affirm the rights of individuals to make informed decisions with regard to protecting the health and dignity of their physical integrity. Drawing upon such noteworthy legal traditions, in 1997, the U.S. Congress criminalized all forms of female genital cutting. In doing so, Congress affirmed the prohibition of such acts does not abridge the religious or constitutional rights of parents. Rather, they protect the rights of girls.

When will the cutting of boy genitals be so criminalized?

**By refusing to criminalize the practice, we have collectively failed to safeguard their bodies from the unscrupulous knives of tradition.**

Consider the *Boldt v. Boldt* custody case, wherein a father, upon converting to Judaism, attempted to force an unwanted circumcision upon his 9-year-old son, in opposition to both the son and the boy’s mother. The case went to the Oregon Supreme Court, which

acknowledged circumcision as “invasive” and leading to the “permanent alteration” of the penis. Nonetheless, the court affirmed the choice to circumcise a boy is “commonly and historically made by parents.”

The boy, age 14 by the time the legal battle concluded, was spared the knife not because he had the right to refuse the elective surgery but because the Oregon Supreme Court determined that forcing a circumcision upon him would harm his relationship with his father.

The “common and historical pattern” whereby parents make the choice to subject their sons, of any age, to an invasive and permanently altering procedure is central here. According to Peter Adler, legal advisor for Attorneys for the Rights of the Child, this line of reasoning is in clear violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th amendment. How can the government logically protect girls from genital cutting without extending equal protection of the law to boys?

Adler asserts: “Circumcision is totally contrary to the fundamentals of American law -- the inalienable right to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness however one chooses, and equality.” He highlights the fact that medical professionals are only licensed to practice medicine, “not to cut off body parts of minors due to a parent's personal preference, culture or religion.” Hence, circumcision violates both the Constitution of the United States of America and well-established medical ethics.

As I write these words, healthy American boys are left vulnerable to the harms of non-consensual, irreversible, harmful and elective genital cutting. By refusing to criminalize the practice, we have collectively failed to safeguard their bodies from the unscrupulous knives of tradition.

It's time to change their fate.



A male is a baby for only a short time of his life, but "your choice" to circumcise him will impact him for his entire life, especially his entire adult, sexually active life.

**YOU DO NOT OWN YOUR SON, OR HIS BODY.**

**IT IS HIS, AND HIS ALONE.**

Infant circumcision violates the human rights of your baby AND the man that he will become.

Let him make the choice for himself.

**HIS BODY, HIS CHOICE.**



**CIRCUMCISED MEN COMPLAIN**

[www.BloodstainedMen.com](http://www.BloodstainedMen.com)

[www.facebook.com/BloodstainedMenTheirFriends](https://www.facebook.com/BloodstainedMenTheirFriends)

*(Bloodstained Men & Their Friends/For PhillyVoice)*

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