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Deep Cuts: Anti-Circumcision Activists Protest Pediatricians



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A medical conference brings "intactivists" out of the woodwork.

"M.D. doesn't mean mutilate dicks," a sign says. "Foreskins are fabulous," another reads. And yet one more, "Circumcision: history's greatest medical fraud."

Anti-circumcision groups, who call themselves “intactivists,” are in town for the American Academy of Pediatrics Conference. They’ve organized what they’re calling the Genital Autonomy Demonstration, which began on Saturday. While their main protest location is in front of the convention center, where about 10,000 pediatricians are gathered, some groups have taken their message to the White House and are considering a march on the Mall.

“It’s kind of miserable to strap a baby down and cut off part of his penis,” says Danelle Frisbie, co-founder of [Saving Our Sons](#) and the INTACT Network, which has satellite groups in different states. “But it’s a big money maker. It’s a multi-billion dollar business. There are ethical physicians who won’t do it, but others are trying to make a buck.”

Frisbie got involved in the intactivist movement through her postgraduate studies in human sexuality, where she was focusing on female genital mutilation. “I had mentors say, ‘If you’re going to focus so much on female health, you should look at male circumcision.’ It made me question, ‘Why is my position kind of sexist?’ I mean, if it’s wrong to cut baby girls, it’s wrong to cut baby boys.”

The [AAP’s most recent policy statement](#) on male circumcision came in 2012. “The health benefits of newborn male circumcision outweigh the risks of the procedure, but the benefits are not great enough to recommend routine circumcision for all newborn boys.”

According to the [Center for Disease Control](#), the national rate of newborn circumcision declined by 10 percent from 1979 to 2010, to about 58 percent.

“Most physicians will say, ‘It’s the parents’ choice,’” says Frisbie. “They’re trying to back away from the question.”

While people came from as far as Alaska for the demonstrations, many of the protesters are local. “You would be amazed at how many crunchy parents circumcise their kids,” says Jennifer Curtis, an intactivist from Germantown, Maryland. “People are asking how to get the blood out of their cloth diapers and it’s like, ‘What?’” The Intact Maryland Facebook group has 990 members.

Another group at the Genital Autonomy Demonstration is the [Bloodstained Men](#), many of whom wear “the suit”—an all-white outfit with a big red stain on the genital area. “This is a literal representation of a wound that never heals,” says Brian Herry, co-director and CEO of Bloodstained Men. He says more than 100 people, both men and women, have worn the suit and “tenfold that many have come out to protests.”

The AAP protest is “more of a statement,” Herry, who is visiting from California, says. “We don’t get to do much education at these events because many doctors, nurses and other medical professionals don’t really care what we have to say. There are tons of ethical doctors. They’re all Hispanic and Asian doctors who come from cultures that don’t circumcise. Unfortunately, most American doctors have chosen the side of circumcision.”

That’s why Herry and some of the other Bloodstained Men chose to protest at the White House. “Here we’re educating people, and they go home and tell their friends. It’s kind of a ripple effect.”

Herry himself is not circumcised. “My own life experience led me to understand how important the foreskin is. Three years ago, I connected the dots in my own head,” he says.

What “really sparked the obsessive epiphany” is the online video [“Child Circumcision: The Elephant in the Hospital,”](#) from Georgetown assistant research professor Ryan McAllister.

Many of the protesters cited the video as part of their education process, though Frisbie emphasizes the differences between the groups. “We’re all pro-autonomy, but we’re coming at it from a research perspective. Others are coming at it from a place of, ‘I’m cut and I’m angry about it.’”

Herry says the Bloodstained Men suit is an important part of the group’s tactics. “It’s a proactive visual and it’s in your face. When something like circumcision has been so ingrained, a lot of people don’t respond to gentle education.”

One protester with Saving Our Sons got involved through a Facebook post. “It opened my mind. There’s no way back from there. Once you learn about this stuff, it’s a one-way ticket.” He legally changed his name to Moe Love last week, “in protest of genital mutilation.”

Love was circumcised as an infant. Saving Our Sons touts foreskin restoration as a practice growing in popularity, but he is skeptical.

“It’s hard work and you don’t get all of the function back,” Love says. “You have to tug at the skin for hours every day for years. I don’t have time for that.”



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