

BETA

MORE ...

CR/D/ETC.

SPECIAL ISSUES

ABOUT

CONTACT



The Yale Herald

YALE'S MOST DARING

THE BULLBLOG

NEWS

VOICES

OP-EDS

PUBLICATION SINCE 1986

CULTURE

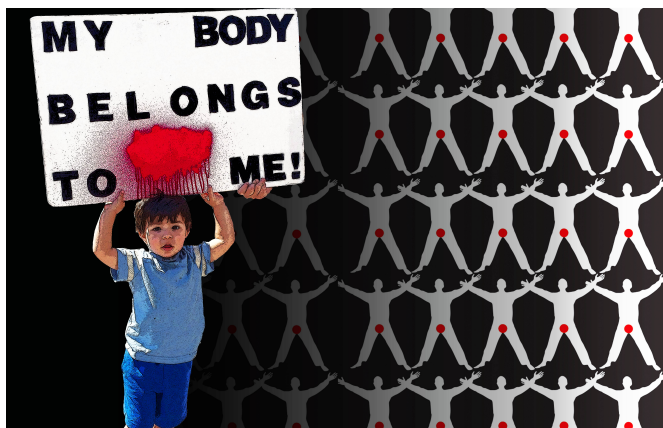
REVIEWS

ONLINE

COVER STORIES

Bloodstained brothers

BY SARAH HOLDER / DECEMBER 4, 2015 / 4



GRAPHIC BY ALEX SWANSON

Four men stand on the corner of College and Chapel street in New Haven on Sat. Oct. 3, dressed head to toe in white Tyvek painter overalls, shivering. On the fabric below their waists, each man proudly sports a large, shocking red splotch.

The white jumpsuits certainly make a statement —“bloody crotches saying ‘J’accuse!’” as one man describes them later—but they aren’t windproof. It’s a *Wuthering Heights* kind of day, the kind where the wind whips around the sides of buildings and under

your hood; where the tips of your fingers get stiff around the pencil you're clutching.

Or the "Stop Torturing Boys" sign you're waving, in the case of the four men standing next to me. They call themselves the Bloodstained Men.

The Bloodstained Men are a 501(c)(3) non-profit recognized by the state of California and operate as an education and outreach organization within the intactivist movement. "Intactivists" advocate for ending male circumcision worldwide, arguing that it is a form of genital mutilation and therefore a human rights violation.

I've been standing next to Brother K, the leader of the pack, for a good 10 minutes before I realize that, though I haven't managed to procure my own suit, we're matching: purple fuzzy cap, blue scarf, red tipped nose. He's wielding a sign that reads "Bloodstained Men Circumcision Horror," punctuated with red blotches; I'm wielding an iPhone to record his voice. Both of us are freezing; neither of us have a foreskin.

The difference is, says Brother K, my genitals are protected by law.

The federal Female Genital Mutilation Law was passed in 1996 and went into effect in 1997, making the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) on a minor a federal criminal offense. FGM is typically performed for cultural or religious purposes, and often involves removal of a woman's entire clitoris. FGM is banned in the United States completely, exempting only necessary surgical operations in extreme cases.

Male circumcision, the medical removal of the foreskin, however, is a socially accepted, and encouraged, practice in the U.S., though rates have been steadily declining. Doctors cite health benefits; Jewish and Muslim leaders cite religious value; and the majority of Americans just kind of go along for the ride. Intactivists are slamming on the brakes. They have called upon Congress to ban the practice in the same way that FGM has been in the U.S., despite arguments that the two aren't comparable procedures.

The international intactivist movement has existed since the late 1980s, but the Bloodstained Men didn't start protesting in their signature ensembles until October 2012. In August of that year, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued an updated Circumcision Policy Statement, asserting that the benefits of infant circumcision definitively outweigh the risks. The benefits included reducing the risk of urinary tract infections, penile cancer, genital herpes, genital warts, HIV, and AIDS.

In order to allow more families the opportunity, the recommendation states, the procedure should be covered by medical insurance. This updated the AAP's 1999 stance that scientific evidence demonstrates potential medical benefits, which had overturned its 1971 stance claiming no medical benefits at all.

U.S. law leaves the ultimate decision of whether or not to circumcise children up to each parent, to be made after consultation with doctors. But intactivists believe that this decision should lie with the affected parties: parents should not circumcise

children without their consent. The AAP statement only provided further justification for the mass circumcision of millions of babies, intactivists feared.

Two months after the 2012 AAP report was released, a group of seven intactivists arrived at an AAP convention in New Orleans to demonstrate their vehement opposition. One of the men brought seven painted jumpsuits as an experimental publicity tactic. When they started zipping up, jaws started dropping.

Brother K, the leader of the Bloodstained Men, was one of the original seven there that afternoon. After that protest, Brother K donned the gory gown a few more times—first alone, at a medical conference in San Francisco, then with five others at the California state capital that winter. He began using Facebook to rally supporters, and in March 2013, 25 white-jumpsuit-wearing men and women stood in front of the White House in honor of Genital Integrity Awareness Week. Now, the group has a Facebook page with 5,434 likes (“Bloodstained Men & Their Friends”), a website (www.bloodstainedmen.com), Livestrong-style bracelets (appealingly emblazoned with the words “Circumcision Anguish—Bloodstained Men”) and a national following.

New Haven is the third-to-last stop on the Bloodstained Men’s Northeast tour. For the past two weeks, Brother K has been protesting on the streets with intactivists Harry Guiremand, David Atkinson, and Glen Powell, and meeting up with local contingents in each city (women, children, friends of bloodstained men).

What sets the Bloodstained Men apart from other intactivists is their well-developed personal brand. “The bloodstain is the most powerful symbol I’ve ever seen,” Brother K tells me. “It’s the stain that we carry under our clothes—it’s forbidden to talk about, it’s forbidden to show, and now we’ve put it on top of our clothes and we’re showing it in public. We’re showing the wound.”

They’re holding double sided signs (with sayings like “Circumcision: History’s Greatest Medical Fraud” and “Education, Not Amputation”), giving out informational cards, and yelling, but only occasionally. As Brother K says, it’s hard to ignore the blood-soaked groins—people are noticing.

“A couple of guys walking by said, ‘You care about dicks too much! You’ve got too much dick on your mind!’” David, the youngest of the bunch, laughs. “And I said, ‘I didn’t choose the body part. I care about human rights.’”

The evening before, I’m waiting outside the steamed glass windows of a coffee shop. It’s 6 p.m., the cloudy sky has skipped the pink-hued sunset stage and entered straight into twilight, and I’m a little nervous to hop into a car with two men I don’t know, Bloodstained or otherwise.

I look up from my phone (open to a photo of a wild-eyed man holding an “Uncut? You Lucky Stiff” sign) and lock gaze with a very tall man, standing on the corner with his arms crossed. “Are you Harry?” I ask. The man unspools his lanky arms, beams, and nods.

We're relieved that neither of us is quite who we expected. Harry is tall with ashen hair and wire-rimmed glasses, dressed in a thin black athletic turtleneck. He's from Hawaii, he tells me on the way to their rental car, and introduces me to Glen from Michigan, who walks beside us. Glen is shorter, wearing jeans, a purple plaid shirt, and sandals that leave his toes vulnerable to puddles. I'm a baby-faced college student, hiding behind the faux-leather jacket I wear when I want to seem older. We're an odd trio. Harry holds the door open for me, and I slide into their red Honda. By the time we arrive at the La Quinta Hotel, where they're staying the night, we're talking foreskins like old friends.

As a firm believer in bodily autonomy, I'm starting to feel a sense of alliance with the damaged guys. Pro-choice activists contend that women should have the right to choose what they do with their own bodies, and therefore that lawmakers cannot legally forbid them from getting an abortion. Intactivists contend that men should have that right to choose, too, and therefore that parents should not be legally allowed to make the decision to circumcise without a child's consent. Maybe behind the bared teeth and violent imagery, the Bloodstained Men are onto something—their body, their choice. Right?

I walk with them into their seventh floor room to see a rack of yellow rain pants hanging in the closet, adorned with red duct-tape versions of the signature splotches. Hurricane Joaquin has been following their Northeast tour, and after a soggy afternoon in Portland, they have to do major water damage control before the long day of New Haven

protesting ahead. Seven posters lean against the walls to dry, slightly smudged but intact.

Harry pulls a chair into the middle of the room and I sit down, four Bloodstained Men perched around me. Brother K sits regally on the rolling chair at his desk. He's a straight-out-of-general-casting, modern-day Gandalf character: white hair parted down the middle and a beard gathered in a low ponytail under his chin. Brother K was born Kenneth David Hopkins 65 years ago, and legally became Brother K on January 24, 1986. The K stands for Kind, the manifesto on his Facebook reads. As for the "Brother," he's more elusive. I figure the solidarity it implies is self-explanatory.

Brother K spins on his chair to face me. "We took a beating in the weather today. Oh, it was vicious." He looks wiped out, but he's used to life on the road. Brother K went on his first protesting trip in 2013, calling it the Midwest Circumcision Crisis Tour: he traveled alone to cities like St. Louis, Louisville, Cincinnati, and Chicago, picking up supporters along the way. Since then, he and his team have been all over the country, backwards and forwards.

"We've actually stood on the grave of—" Brother K stops himself. "Do you know who John Harvey Kellogg is? Have you learned enough about circumcision yet?" I stammer apologies, and Brother K nods sadly—he had figured as much. In that moment, the shame of America's uninformed youth rests on my shoulders.

"Who wants to tell the story—*briefly*, just briefly," Brother K asks. Harry wins the stage, and we settle

in to listen. David reclines on the bed, wearing a red plaid shirt and jeans, which, from my angle, I can see are lined with red plaid fabric; Glen sits cross-legged on the other bed, massaging his bare feet; and I sit in my uncomfortable chair, rapt. Harry stands to my right, his spindly frame glowing under the light of a neighboring neon “IKEA” sign, and begins.

“The whole origins of circumcision in the U.S. are sex-negative. It was all about masturbation mania,” Harry explains. “Before they had the germ theory of disease, they had the nervous-excitation theory. That’s when they believed that if you got too excited, you’d get ill.” In Victorian era America, doctors and religious leaders agreed that masturbation, in addition to being immoral and unnatural, could lead to mental and physical deterioration. Books like *The Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution* reinforced the notion, and doctors warned of masturbation-induced tuberculosis, heart disease, epilepsy, and insanity. Harry scoffs. “This is all 19th century quackery.”

One of the first proponents of this “quackery” was lay health reformer Sylvester Graham—yes, *that* Graham, of cracker fame. As an evangelical minister in the 1830s, he preached about the dangers of carnal desire, and urged people to eat bread from the flavorless, whole-wheat recipe he’d developed. The dry, dull food wouldn’t excite the way meat or sugar or, even worse, white bread did.

By the 1870s, John Harvey Kellogg—yes, *that* Kellogg—had internalized Graham’s teachings and sought other ways of quelling young people’s

masturbation urges. In Kellogg's 1881 book, *Plain Facts for Old and Young*, he lists several possible fixes for boys: Bandaging the area; tying boys' hands; putting a cage around the organs. Finally, "a remedy which is almost always successful in small boys is circumcision," he states. "The operation should be performed by a surgeon without administering an anæsthetic, as the brief pain attending the operation will have a salutary effect upon the mind." He advocated for pouring carbolic acid on girls' clitoris', to achieve the same effect.

Inspired by Graham's wheaty repressers, Kellogg also developed cereal and granolas that were intentionally bland, to avoid the sort of sexual arousal that could be stimulated by a nice hearty bowl of Honey Bunches of Oats today.

Brother K beckons me to look at a photo on his Facebook page: On a stop during a 2013 tour, six Bloodstained Men stand atop John Harvey Kellogg's grave in Battle Creek, MI, hands raised triumphantly. "ENDING THE REIGN OF TERROR," the caption reads. Some commenters' interpretations are a bit off-message—"GMO crap!"—but the general consensus is that Kellogg is Intactivist Public Enemy #1.

By the 19th century, doctors like J.W. Robertson (who seems unaffiliated with any tasteless snacks) dismissed "masturbational insanity," and today masturbation is less culturally taboo than ever. But Harry says America hasn't shaken the legacy of Kellogg's teachings—the justifications have just evolved with the times, letting circumcision become an accepted cultural practice.

In the 1950s, 75 percent of American boys were circumcised. The percentage fell to 64.5 in 1979, and by today's calculations, the numbers hover around 50 percent. But to intactivists, those statistics are too high—the routine removal of “perfectly healthy tissue” has become a frighteningly normalized procedure in American hospitals, Brother K says.

He gestures at the sign the Bloodstained Men brandish most frequently: “Circumcision Removes 16+ Functions.” Like all of their signs, it's written in thick black letters and stained with painted red blood splatters.

I find a “lost list” that enumerates those functions at circumstitions.com. Though the URL name itself seems to somewhat undermine its credibility, the facts align with the intactivists' claims, cataloguing immunological losses, protective losses, and sexual losses. The foreskin protects the penis from abrasion and callousing; it contains thousands of tiny nerve endings; it boasts immunological defenses in the mucosa. It's not just a small flap of skin, the site insists. “If you unfolded an average man's foreskin and spread it out, its area would be about 15 square inches,” it says, comparing that length to the width of a post card. (A not-to-scale example is posted on the site, illustrated with an unambiguously phallic Leaning Tower of Pisa.)

Brother K claims that in the 80s, the AAP publicized a pamphlet for parents listing these structures and functions of the foreskin. But in 1990, he says that info vanished, and since then has been replaced with numerous documents supporting the

procedure. "Parents are not deliberately injuring their babies. Doctors have brainwashed American parents," Brother K tells me. "They've demonized the normal male body."

The next day on the picket lines, I meet Nancy Farr and Sera Giambattista, both Connecticut midwives and passionate intactivists themselves. They're shivering on the sidewalk alongside the men, holding signs but notably bloodstain-free. Nancy says she's been saving foreskins for 30 years, using her platform to warn mothers against circumcision. "If you were looking at a circumcised penis for the first time, you'd think 'Oh my God, he's been in an industrial accident!'" Nancy says. Sera chimes in, her green eyes blazing: "Men think that that purple ring is a normal part of their anatomy, but it's a scar from an important organ being removed, forcibly."

Nancy turns to me conspiratorially, quick to attest to the sexual losses, woman to woman. Along with the sensitive nerve endings removed with the foreskin, the frenulum, which provides the most intense sexual pleasure, is often removed along with it. "It's, like, a huge difference in the way these guys make love to somebody," she whispers. "It's really a robbery." I manage to scoot away before she asks to swap tales from the field.

"Do you have a stand on this topic?" one of the other women, Robin, calls after me before I can escape. I waffle, afraid she'll realize I'm an imposter. Just found out about it yesterday, still learning, doing some research... "Well good luck on your

journey, to wherever you end up,” she says. “Maybe eventually you’ll have your own kids and you’ll have to make this decision.”

If I hadn’t been raised in the U.S., Robin would have less cause to worry—in other Western countries, circumcision is less common. In 1949, a British pediatrician published a study called “The Fate of the Foreskin,” asserting that 16 British boys under five died from circumcision a year, due to hemorrhages or anesthetic complications. Since then, prominent members of the European medical community have condemned the practice, including 38 physicians who, in response to the AAP’s statement, issued a joint paper in *Pediatrics*, the official journal of the AAP. The paper accused the AAP’s studies of reflecting American cultural biases, and discounted most of their claims of medical benefit.

They discount all the medical benefits as “questionable, weak, and likely to have little public health relevance,” except for UTI prevention, which they concede to be relevant. They also claim incidental deaths and partial amputations have occurred, though no official statistics have been reported. What’s more, they write, some studies suggest psychological, pain-related, and sexual problems later in life—effects the Bloodstained Men attest to eagerly.

“They read the riot act to them. In diplomatic language, but the contempt was withering,” says Brother K. “There’s no other issue where the

medical communities of advanced countries are completely at odds,” Harry adds. “There’s nothing else like it.”

The report ends scathingly, accusing the AAP of being at direct odds with the UN’s Declaration of the Rights of Child, and in conflict with the Hippocratic oath: “*Primum non nocere*: First, do no harm.”

And in October of 2013, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe passed a resolution calling into question the legality of male ritual circumcision, compelling states to “clearly define the medical, sanitary and other conditions practices such as the non-medically justified circumcision of young boys,” and suggests consulting with the child before operating. The “other practices” with which circumcision is lumped include forcible tattooing, piercing, and corporal punishment.

The resolution doesn’t achieve the intactivists’ ultimate dream of banning the practice, but it’s an important vote of confidence. Brother K laughs at my wide-eyed expression. “You have officially entered the rabbit hole,” he tells me. “It’s deep, and it’s infuriating.”

To hear Brother K tell it, the European and the American medical communities are both out for blood— each others, and, in the American’s case, young boys’. But Dr. Adam Hittelman, a urologist at Yale New Haven Medical Center, is perplexed by the whole Bloodstained Men thing (perhaps mostly as to why a nice young girl like myself is so interested in them.) He also believes that any prospective, or

expectant, parent, should be well-informed, however, so he's willing to walk me through the process when I visit his office.

He pulls out a book from the shelf, pointing to hieroglyphics on the cover depicting Egyptian men snipping other men's genitals. Circumcision has existed for hundreds of years, for cultural purposes as well as medical ones. In the Jewish faith, the procedure is called *brit milah*, and is written into the Torah as a commandment, a sign of the covenant with God. In Islam, the procedure is called *tahara*, meaning purification, and is said to have been considered "a law for men" by Muhammad.

Historians postulate that both religious practices stem from the medical reality that cleaning a penis with a foreskin is harder than cleaning a circumcised one. Living in hot, arid climates without access to showers, Jews and Muslims might have initially circumcised their boys as a matter of hygiene.

According to modern medical research, circumcision reduces the risk of urinary tract infections by 90 percent, the risk of STDs by up to 60 percent, and the risk of penile infection to almost zero. Balinitis, a penis infection caused by poor hygiene, is another legitimate risk.

"To say there's no benefit would be a bit naive," Hittelman says. "All you'd have to see is one man with penile cancer, which is a very, very devastating disease." Balinitis results in rashes, redness, discharge and pain; UTIs in itchiness; STDs in widespread contagion, and sometimes death.

Outside on Saturday, though, when I mention the question of hygiene, the Bloodstained Men are ready to spar. Michael, an intactivist who made the trip down from Portchester, New York, takes personal offense. He's wearing a fire engine red raincoat, and as he talks, his face slowly changes to match the bright plastic. When people say penises are hard to take care of, he tells them, "No, you're full of shit. I know so."

"When you go in the shower, the dick is the easiest to clean. It's easier than the butt!" he tells me. I nod noncommittally, trying to avoid looking adversarial but finding it hard to relate. "I don't understand how hard it is to clean a pee-pee," he shrugs. Besides, says Michael, during every major war you hear about soldiers without access to showers who get horrible infections in their arms, legs, and eyes. "But you've never heard about soldiers getting cock-rot—not in any war," he says.

"I've never even heard that term before!" Toby Graves chimes in, who is listening next to me. "That's 'cause I just made it up," says Michael, triumphant. (Hittelman tells me later that many soldiers in arid climates do, however, get Ballinitis, which, after cross-checking their descriptions, seems to bear striking similarities to the fictitious disease.)

Toby, age 15, could be considered more of a Bloodstained Boy—he stands no taller than five foot three, wearing a fur-covered hat with little bear ears. Shaggy, mullet-like flaps cover his mouth as he talks. He's been an active intactivist since the summer, but this Saturday marks his first

Bloodstained Men protest. He's inclined to agree with Michael.

"I assume the fingertips and toes are harder to take care of than the penis," he says matter-of-factly.

"You wouldn't rip off your baby's toe, right?" This seems like a trick question.

Hittelman insists that the preponderance of medical research suggests removing toes and removing foreskins aren't exactly comparable. But Hittelman is also a pragmatist: When parents ask him whether or not to circumcise their child, he tells them it's their personal choice, and that they can't really make a wrong decision. "I don't think that circumcision is the right answer for everybody, but I do think that for some people it can be the right answer," he says, and "If you support that in your family or your culture or in your religion I'd support it, and I'd be happy to help—and if you don't want to, I would support them not circumcising."

Ultimately, Hittelman tells me, the evidence on both sides can be limited. He admits that the risk factors for male UTIs and penile cancer aren't enormous (20.4 percent and .06 percent, respectively), and that STDs are more effectively prevented by wearing a condom. Circumcision definitively lowers these already low rates, but other medical procedures performed after potential contraction can work to cure them retro-actively.

As for sexual sensitivity, that depends on the person: a quick literature search shows studies that argue decreased and increased sexual function for

both intact and circumcised parties. (Nancy seems to have had abnormally bad luck.)

Hittelman does agree that if a surgery goes wrong, as any surgery might, the risks of circumcision would definitely outweigh the benefits. A CDC study cites a .2 percent rate of complication in infant circumcision—not as small a number as one might initially think—but most of the complications are simply bleeding and infections. Dan Bollinger, an opponent of circumcision, estimates that 117 infants die a year from the procedure, but that number is widely contested in the medical community.

Hittelman's pragmatism is echoed by many doctors and researchers. Indeed, the AAP's language is fairly ambivalent itself, contrary to the language in the European counter-argument. The AAP's statement is more about affording access; less about prescribing a norm. The AAP believes that the medical benefits to patients, however small, outweigh the risks—and though their medical recommendations exist primarily for the pediatric community, their stance has evolved partly to encourage insurance companies and state Medicaid plans to offer coverage for the procedure.

After the AAP released their lukewarm 1999 statement, circumcision Medicaid coverage stopped in many states. Studies suggest that their neutral stance contributed to the distinct drop of nationwide circumcisions in the years that followed. According to CDC researcher Charnel E. El Bcheraoui, the percentage of circumcised boys in the U.S. dropped from about two-thirds from 1980-2000 to closer to half from 2006-2009.

“There’s a lot of things in life I think are important to fight for, there’s a lot of world causes I think are really important. But I have a little difficulty understanding what drives them, to be sincere,” Hittelman says of intactivists. “If they believe that we’re propagating this grand myth, and therefore mutilating all these penises, then sure that’s a cause to fight for. But I personally don’t believe that.”

Hittelman clearly hasn’t met the Bloodstained Men.

Kenneth David Hopkins was born in 1947, and was circumcised shortly thereafter. But 40 years later, when he legally changing his name, Kenneth underwent a spiritual restoration. Gone was the child his parents had christened and cut. By renaming himself, Brother K says, he reclaimed his body, escaping the “curse of an angry and ancient God” that circumcision represented.

The ideological transformation that lead to the appellative one started in college at the University of Illinois. After reading *Myra Breckinridge*, a novel by Gore Vidal which compares circumcision to “a rape of the penis,” Brother K found himself questioning his parents’ motives for circumcising him as a baby.

There were no formal intactivist organizations back then—only paper mailing lists and scattered supporters across the country. So in 1980, together with his friend and long-time companion Carole Babykak (her real name), with whom he now has a daughter, Brother K formed Citizens Against Ritual Violence, an organization designed to expose “the

deceit and misinformation behind the circumcision campaign in the United States.”

CARV gained momentum in the 1980s, leading protests against baby circumcision across the state of California. Local newspapers published at the time show Brother K and Carole wearing stocking masks and holding signs saying “Circumcision is a Psychopathic Mutilation!” and “Purpose of Circumcision to Break the Man’s Spirit Forever.”

Meanwhile, the international intactivist movement was emerging—in 1985, a nurse named Marilyn Milos founded the National Organization of Circumcision Information Resource Center (NOCIRC) in California, as a part of the International Coalition for Genital Integrity. She began holding biannual symposia to educate the public about the dangers of circumcision. It was there that intactivists previously scattered across the country began making connections and building a community.

All four Bloodstained Men I spoke to were circumcised at birth, and have similar origin stories: one shocking moment of realization, followed by anger, followed by soul-searching internet research, followed by the discovery of a national organization that can supply all the answers and provides outlets to express the psychological trauma they claim has remained long after the physical scarring has healed.

“I was watching a sex program called ‘Sex with Sue,’” Glen tells me. “She was talking about G-Spots of the male, and she mentioned the frenulum.” He noticed that he never felt anything there, and he

wondered why. A few quick searches led him to determine that he didn't feel anything because he didn't have a frenulum—circumcision was to blame. Then, he stumbled upon a video an intactivist had posted of a baby undergoing circumcision. "I watched the video, and it just shocked me," he says. He immediately started volunteering with NOCIRC Michigan, and later connected with Brother K when the Bloodstained Men toured through Columbus last year.

In 2007, Glen began the process of reclaiming his body physically. Using a device called the TLC Tugger, he partially restored his own foreskin. "It's like, if you were to gain 100 pounds, your body would make new skin cells to accommodate it," he explains. Glen used the Tugger's tugging to compel that same sort of skin cell regeneration, wearing the device a few hours a day for four years until skin cells covered the head of his penis again. It was painful, he says, but finally he's whole.

Harry, now in his 60s, found out about his own circumcision when he was a teenager. "My mother had told me that when I came home originally from the hospital as an infant, I just never stopped crying," he says. "I never put two and two together until later, but of course I had been traumatized and of course that's why I kept crying." I arrange my face in what I hope is a sympathetic expression.

Even though the issue has dominated their thoughts for decades, the four Bloodstained Men I spoke with have other lives outside of intactivism. Brother K studied journalism in college but ended up being "a jack of all trades." At 68 he has now retired, and can

devote full-time attention to his non-profit. Harry was a software engineer in Southern California until 1997, when he decided to move to Kuauai and start a Bed and Breakfast. After 15 years, he, too, is retired. David studied math and music at Stony Brook University and plays occasional drum gigs in between tours, and Glen runs a flower shop in Michigan.

For now, though, they're all squeezed into one tiny room in New Haven, Conn., fortifying their signs, plastering new red duct tape on their provisional rain pants, and chatting on the record about penises to a wide-eyed 20-year-old.

Their mission is to make sure no more boys have to suffer the trauma they feel they've been objected to against their will.

By noon on Saturday it hasn't rained yet, but the sky looks threatening. Amanda Decker rocks back and forth on the balls of her feet to keep warm, burrowing into the hood of the dark blue raincoat she wears over a shirt that says "Fuck Circumcision: Don't Welcome Him Into Life...With A Knife." Yesterday was her wedding anniversary, she tells me, beaming, so tonight after she escapes the cold, she and her husband have plans to go out to dinner and a comedy show. But first, she has a date with the Bloodstained Men.

Amanda is a nurse at Backus Hospital in Norwich, Conn. and found organizations like Intact America and Save Our Sons through independent research and social media. "There's a lot of ignorance within

my community of nurses,” she says. “Every nurse that I ever talk to still holds on to the idea that ‘It’s cleaner, it’s easier, it’s the parents’ choice.’ But it’s not the parents’ choice, it’s the baby’s choice.”

This emphasis on bodily autonomy has been echoed by all of the Bloodstained Men. Toby, who stands on the corner next to his mother, Robin Graves, proudly holds a sign I recognize: “His Body, His Choice,” it reads.

“Our founding fathers were not circumcised,” says Brother K. “If they had known that this was going to happen they absolutely would have put Freedom of Body in there with Freedom of Speech and Freedom of Worship, et cetera.”

This is the opening I’ve been hoping for. But when I ask if the Bloodstained Men find themselves aligned with the Planned Parenthood movement, whose pro-choice mantra “Her Body, Her Choice,” appears on Toby’s sign with only the gender pronouns switched, they can’t seem to see the correlation.

Abortion is a touchy subject, and the Bloodstained Men prefer to stay away from it. “In our work, we have people of all stripes, religions, ideologies, and backgrounds. And we don’t argue with people about what they’re doing regarding other issues. It could cause our movement to fragment,” Brother K explains.

If Amanda’s husband had his own choice, he would rather their anniversary didn’t begin with her protesting against circumcision, but Amanda says he knows she’s never going to change her mind.

“He’s one of those, I’m circumcised, I’m fine kind of

fellows. So we just don't talk about it," she explains. "I don't want to get a divorce over it!" With the support of Nancy and Sera, her midwives, she fought to make sure her children stayed intact.

Mothers who circumcised their sons but have since seen the intactivist light call themselves "Regret Moms"—mothers who are hoping to stop other parents from making the same mistakes they did. Nancy Farr is one of them. "It's not a very nice way to enter the world," Nancy tells me she now realizes. "Welcome to the world, we're gonna cut your penis off!"

But, says Harry, "It's important to reach people before they've had a son and cut the first boy." Once they've cut one, the blood-letting rarely stops. "The guilt is often so great that they can't face what they've done."

David is lucky—he talked to his parents about eight years ago, and by now they're supportive of the cause and of the path he's taken. But when Glen told his mother he was an intactivist, she was angry, afraid that when people in their small Michigan town found out, he'd lose business at his flower shop because of his radical views. "All we want to hear from our parents is, 'I'm sorry.' Some type of 'I'm sorry,'" says Glen. "When you don't have that, it's just devastating."

Harry's attempts to confront his own mother were futile. "It was clear that my mother was so, so uncomfortable that I couldn't pursue it. The look of horror on her face when I tried to bring it up..." Harry says after that, his relationship with his parents

changed; he couldn't trust them anymore. He was 16.

Brother K didn't speak to his parents for about 20 years after becoming an intactivist. They were old-school, Southern born and bred, and weren't the type to ever apologize for anything, he says. When, years later, his mother proudly told him that his brother's two sons had stayed intact because of his intactivist work, they finally came to terms. When I ask if they've ever come out to picket with him, he shakes his head. To his parents, he'll always be Kenneth David Hopkins.

Maybe Brother K feels most at home traveling around the country in a white jumpsuit, surrounded by his bloodstained brothers in arms.

"Harry was just telling me that out of all the cities we've been to, this is the best response we've seen so far," Brother K says. "I asked him 'How do you mean' and he said, 'Well, you know, no one has rolled down their windows and cursed us yet.'"

In three years of protests, they've gotten middle fingers, uninterpretable horn "Beep"s, thumbs down, thumbs up, "Get a job, a-hole"s, and sincere "thank you"s. In New Haven, they've gotten mostly intrigued skepticism and adamant affirmation.

At 11 a.m. Glen wandered into Dunkin Donuts to grab a coffee, going for the layered look of gray sweatshirt over bloodstained trousers, and he brought his sign along with him (a relatively tame "Circumcision = Child Abuse"). "They asked what my

sign said, and suddenly everyone in the Dunkin Donuts was talking to me about penises!” Glen says. This seems to be a pattern. “When I left, I think they agreed with me.”

A few hours later, a man who asked to be identified only as Paul wanders over from across the street. He’s not the target demographic—circumcised, 51 years old, two daughters, no sons, no plans to have more children—but, as Nancy tells him, “It’s not too late for you to have an open mind about it and believe that it’s wrong!”

He assures her he does, but just in case, she launches into the pitch. Paul becomes increasingly gung ho.

“Who started this? Kellogg, you said?”

“Yeah, John Harvey Kellogg. The same guy who made the cornflakes!”

“I don’t eat corn. GMOs.”

Before he leaves with a Bloodstained Men contact card, Paul directs a final ominous message to me, the impressionable ingenue he has already mistaken for a high schooler. “The whole world’s gone crazy—you’ve been lied to your whole life. Every part of your life you’ve been lied to.”

The Bloodstained Men want to reach people like Paul in the hopes that they’ll stop their family from circumcising future generations of boys. They believe that every street corner they picket on creates a positive ripple effect. “Every foreskin is important,” Nancy says.

But the Bloodstained Men have a broader goal, beyond converting individuals—they want one of their cases to get all the way to the Supreme Court, as the Female Genital Mutilation Laws have. “The Supreme Court will find under the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment of the Constitution that a law cannot protect one class of citizen—it has to protect all people,” Brother K says. “It’s unfair, and unconstitutional. As American citizens, baby boys deserve the same protection that baby girls enjoy in the United States.”

When I echo their words to Dr. Hittelman, he scratches his head. It’s not a valid comparison, he says. “When they’re doing female circumcision they’re not just removing the clitoral hood, they’re removing the clitoris,” he explains. “Here, no one’s saying cut off the head of the penis. It’s apples and oranges.”

And female genital mutilation, which is most commonly practiced in western, eastern, and north-eastern African countries, has been determined by the World Health Organization to have no health benefits, only risks. Traditionally, it’s performed as part of a cultural or religious ceremony and reflects gender inequities: removing a woman’s clitoris reduces her sexual libido and discourages illicit (premarital) sex. Doctors or tribal leaders are not circumcising women to prevent UTI’s, or clitoral cancer—they’re committing a human rights violation, say the W.H.O., albeit with a long societal and religious history.

But there’s no distinction, say the Bloodstained Men. They, too, feel their human rights, their bodily

integrity, their sense of self was threatened long before they could protest.

This is one human rights issue they feel they can have a tangible impact in addressing. “The most touching response we get is when someone says: my son was saved because of intactivism. My son is whole now because of intactivism,” says Harry. “And when that happens, it’s... you can’t really describe the emotion.”

The next day, on Sun., Oct. 4, the Bloodstained Men (& their Friends) travel to New York City’s Union Square for the penultimate Northeast protest. Monday they go upstate to Hudson, New York. And by Wednesday, Harry’s back on a Hawaii beach, Glen’s selling tulips, David’s preparing for his next gig, and Brother K is back in California, planning his next moves.

He has a slight head cold after just about freezing to death in New Haven, he tells me over the phone, but he’s thrilled with the Manhattan response. A Howard Stern producer handed them a business card (“We haven’t gotten any follow up on that, though, so who knows”), and in the days following, radio hosts have called them onto their shows (“They wait till I’m off the phone to trash me”).

They’re riding the wave of momentum: in a few weeks, the Bloodstained Men will be traveling to the White House again to picket at the the annual AAP conference. I wish them well, and Brother K thanks me.

“I want to give you as much information as I can,” he says earnestly. “I want to help you to understand.”

The Bloodstained Men wake up every morning in the hopes that every person they reach, every phone call they make, every horrified passerby visually accosted by their bloody bodies will someday understand. They want parents, expecting parents, and would-be parents to rethink what they mean by choice. Sometimes, that entails wielding a “How Dare You Cut His Penis!” poster. Pragmatists be damned.

The Bloodstained Men serve as a gory reminder: we all have skin in this game.



Like

4 Responses

M. J. Wise says:



[December 5, 2015 at 11:14 am](#)

According to modern medical research, circumcision reduces the risk of urinary tract infections by 90 percent, the risk of STDs by up to 60 percent, and the risk of penile infection to almost zero. Balinitis, a penis infection caused by poor hygiene, is another legitimate risk.

—

These are relative reductions, not absolute risk reductions. UTIs and penile infections are rare, so a big percentage of a little number is just a little number. Girls have far, far more UTIs than either intact or circumcised boys.

—

“To say there’s no benefit would be a bit naive,” Hittelman says. “All you’d have to see is one man with penile cancer, which is a very, very devastating disease.”

—

Penile cancer is incredibly rare. The American Cancer Society does not recommend circumcision to prevent it.

“When they’re doing female circumcision they’re not just removing the clitoral hood, they’re removing the clitoris,” he explains. “Here, no one’s saying cut off the head of the penis. It’s apples and oranges.”

—

Ah, but removing a clitoral hood of a female baby is just as illegal in the US as is removing the entire clitoris. Dr. Hittelman is simply moving the goalposts here to try to distract from the fact that the procedure equivalent to male circumcision is completely illegal to perform on a baby girl.

He also appears to have no appreciation for the function of the foreskin – he no doubt is circumcised himself and was probably taught in medical school that the foreskin is just a useless flap of skin. Personally and professionally, he is deeply invested in portraying mutilation in the most positive light possible.

Reply

Matt says:

December 5, 2015 at 2:01 pm



I am an American medical student. On the whole, I am happy with my profession, and proud that I will graduate medical school next year.

But it is truly the shame of American medicine that our physicians have now spent over a century trying to dredge up dubious justifications to profit off irreversible amputative surgery on nonconsenting infants.

The rest of the developed world doesn't perform routine circumcision on infants. There is no evidence at all that they are less healthy than us. Circumcision promoters can gish-gallop all manner of contested associations, but they cannot contest reality. And the fact of the matter is that there is absolutely no public health case for forcibly removing healthy, functional tissue from an infant before he can decide for himself what he wants.

Good on these intactivists for saying what I cannot, for fear of professional retribution. I wish them success, and I hope we can someday end this madness.

*As an aside, I believe you (or the Dr. you talked to) made some errors in the numbers, most notably in UTI risk. That number refers to the chance that a febrile, hospitalized infant will have a UTI. The UTI incidence in boys is approximately 1%, as per the European rebuttal you mentioned.

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2013/03/12/pec2896.full.pdf>

Reply

Ron Low says:



December 6, 2015 at 12:10 am

Circumcision alters sex dramatically. It is unethical to impose that on someone who hasn't given informed consent.

Hundreds of thousands of men are undertaking non-surgical foreskin restoration to undo some of the sexual damage of circumcision.

Reply

Hugh Young says:



December 6, 2015 at 6:15 am

'I find a "lost list" that enumerates those functions at circumstitions.com. Though the URL name itself seems to somewhat undermine its credibility, ...'

That URL for my website, The Intactivism Pages, is just the name of the list of bad reasons to cut babies around which the site has grown. (I thought there'd be about 30, too many to be credible, and there are now 580:

<http://www.circumstitions.com/all.html>)

Dr Hittelman has what we call a "circumcised mindset" when he supports some of these bad reasons: like many people in the USA, he starts from the position that cutting boy babies' genitals is the norm, and leaving them alone needs to be justified, when for most of the world, and especially the rest of the developed world, the reverse is the case. You can find similar (bad)

reasons to cut various other parts off babies, but
you need no reason to leave them whole.

[Reply](#)

NEWS & FEATURES	VOICES	CULTURE	REVIEWS	THE BULLBLOG
Cover Stories	Interviews	On campus	Hit list	All posts
Features	Personal	Off campus	Hall of shame	
	essays			
	Poetry			
	Fiction			

