Circumcision: Are parents cutting out the sign of the covenant?

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Circumcision: Are parents cutting out the sign of the covenant?

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NEW YORK (ABP)—The foundational symbol of God's ancient covenant with his people is getting a lot less common in the United States, but medical and theological debates still rage about the propriety of circumcision.

Recent legal battles over whether parents can mandate circumcision for their children and new medical findings regarding the relative merits and risks of the practice have given parents reason to pause.

A family circumcision set and trunk from the eighteenth century included a wooden box covered in cow hide with silver implements: silver trays, clip, pointer, silver flask, spice vessel.

The debate, although originating in the religious realm, now deals mainly with social mores and the latest scientific consensus.

At the height of circumcision's popularity in the mid-20th century, 90 percent of American males were circumcised.

But the rate in the United States has declined steadily since the 1970s, according to the National Hospital Discharge Survey and other health organizations. In 2005, roughly 80 percent of all U.S. males were circumcised.

That percentage is likely to decrease in the future, as recent annual statistics show that only 56 percent of male babies born in America are being circumcised.

Some Baptists who once understood the procedure to be an American standard rooted in biblical tradition now are taking a second look at it.

Catherine Bell did just that when she decided not to circumcise her son Nicolas, now 4. She had remained undecided about the procedure prior to her delivery, but at the hospital, when she happened to hear some recently cut babies crying, she opted out.

“My reasoning was, I just didn’t see the point,” said Bell, who attends First Baptist Church in Paragould, Ark. “I know there’s a very small risk of things going wrong, but why do it if you don’t have to?”

She’s not alone. According to Jennifer Lusk, a registered nurse in the pediatric urology department at Houston’s Texas Children’s Hospital, ever-increasing numbers of expectant mothers are questioning the practice.

“It used to be that people would come in and say, ‘We want this done!’ Now it’s like, ‘We’ve done a lot of reading, the older kids are circumcised and my husband is circumcised, but … I’m not sure if we have to do this,’” Lusk said. “More people are figuring out that they don’t have to. They’re starting to ask questions about it.”

In some areas, it’s a slow change. Bell said Nicolas is a minority in their small city—as far as she knows, he is the only uncircumcised boy in the two pre-schools he’s attended. And family members, she said, “laid it on thick” when they heard Bell and her husband, Jerry, decided not to have their son snipped.

Many of her friends are curious about her decision to forego the operation, she said, adding that ignorance is the main factor in the public’s reticence to accept it as “normal.”

“People think it’s unusual because of a lot of misinformation and misunderstanding about why it’s even done,” she said. “People just do it

because it’s what everybody else does.”

Everybody in the United States, that is. Only 30 percent of males worldwide are circumcised, according to the World Health Organization. The procedure is most prevalent in Muslim countries, Israel, the United States, the Philippines and South Korea. Various tribes in Africa also use the practice, sometimes as a counterpart to female circumcision.

Though not mentioned in the Quran, the practice is discussed in the secondary collection of Islamic holy writings known as the Hadith, and Muslim scholars still debate whether it is mandatory or merely recommended.

And while most Christians associate circumcision with Abraham’s Genesis-based covenant with God, it was prevalent in the ancient world well before then, according to Jim Nogalski, a professor of Old Testament at Baylor University.

“Circumcision in the Middle East was a fairly common practice,” he said. “There are varying versions of where it came from and who did it first. Prisoners are often depicted naked (in ancient art), so you get a certain sense that there were circumcised people.”

After the Greeks conquered the known world, however, trends changed. The Greeks greatly admired the human form, had no problem with public nudity and considered circumcision to be mutilation of the body. The taboo against circumcision became so great that Jews were not allowed to participate in the Greek world’s (clothes-free) gymnasiums, and some underwent reconstructive surgery.

Among the earliest Christians, circumcision became a topic of heated debate. Paul and a faction of the ancient church known as the Judaizers debated the relevance of the procedure in light of the New Covenant. Some thought that in order to be Christian, a man had to be Jewish, which meant

being circumcised, Nogalski said. Others thought no one should be circumcised against his will.

A third group, described mostly in the books of Luke and Acts, believed Jews, but not Gentiles, who became Christians should be circumcised. A fourth group, most notably in Ephesians, believed a proper reading of Scripture showed that literal circumcision was no longer expected for anyone, Nogalski said.

Like their ancient counterparts, modern Jews attach significant symbolism to the circumcision ceremony, called a brit milah or bris. For Jews worldwide, it is one of the fundamental ways to identify with their faith.

A mohel is a Jewish leader specially trained to conduct the circumcision ceremony. New Jersey rabbi Mark Cooper, a Jerusalem-trained mohel, said circumcision celebrates the vitality of the Jewish tradition and expresses hope and confidence in the future of the faith.

“The ceremony is a covenant ceremony, and it serves the purpose of formally welcoming the child into the people of Israel with God,” said Cooper, who is a fifth-generation mohel.

The ceremony also serves the purpose of celebrating parenthood and committing to raise the child in the Jewish faith, said Cooper, who performs several circumcisions a month. It is not unlike a baby-dedication service for Baptists or an infant baptism for other Christians.

But while matters of faith and tradition dictate circumcision for Jewish males, social norms and the medical community have largely dictated its prevalence for non-Jewish Americans.

Experts in sexually transmitted infections called for universal circumcision as early as 1914, but the practice among Anglo-Saxon Protestants in the United States gained momentum in the 1930s from obstetricians and

gynecologists who touted the medical advantages of the operation.

Most medical books around that time began to prescribe circumcision to relieve a wide variety of conditions, and many thought circumcision led to improved personal hygiene.

What's more, in the 1950s, American insurance and welfare programs began paying for the procedure, which removed any financial burden from having it done, noted Robert Darby, an Australian medical historian who maintains the site www.historyofcircumcision.com.

The U.S. military was another important influence, according to Darby. During World War I, the military circumcised adult soldiers and sailors in order to make them less susceptible to diseases. Then, he said, when the fathers returned home, they approved the practice for their sons.

Indeed, several current medical studies seem to echo circumcision proponents who say it helps prevent urinary-tract infections, HIV and sexually transmitted diseases.

However, a number of circumcision opponents have become increasingly vocal against the practice, which they consider unnecessary at best and mutilation at worst.

There are several anti-circumcision organizations, including one called Jews Against Circumcision. Circumcision opponents say the procedure causes extreme pain, decreases sensitivity during sex, and produces long-term psychological and sexual trauma. They also say parents have no right to make a lifelong decision for their young son, especially when the procedure risks complications like profuse bleeding and infection.

Others wonder about the economic side of the practice—doctors push it, they say, because they get paid for performing a relatively uncomplicated procedure. And discarded foreskins are often sold for use in private

bioresearch labs, the pharmaceutical industry and even beauty products.

Lusk, the Texas Children's Hospital nurse, agreed that there is no medical reason to perform a circumcision.

"It's an option right when the baby is born—it's done only if the parents want it done," she said.

Darby said the argument that circumcision prevents diseases that can be spurred by poor hygiene is disingenuous.

But he also mustered a moral argument. "Circumcision is based upon the erroneous principle that boys … are so badly fashioned by Creative Power that they must be reformed by the surgeon," Darby wrote.

He added that circumcising boys to lessen the risk of sexually transmitted infections could have the unintended consequence of encouraging promiscuity in circumcised young men.

"The plea that this unnatural practice will lessen the risk of infection to the sensualist in promiscuous intercourse is not one that our honorable (medical) profession will support. Parents, therefore, should be warned that this ugly mutilation of their children involves serious danger, both to their physical and moral health."

American medical institutions have taken more of a neutral stance on the issue. In 1997, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists reclassified neonatal circumcision from a "routine" to an "elective" procedure.

Since then, 16 states have stopped including circumcisions in Medicaid plans, with more considering the option.

Texas Children's Hospital offers the procedure as an option for parents, unless there are conflicting medical issues that require it. Typically,

children under 10 pounds and one month old undergo an injection of local anesthetic and are given a sugar-soaked pacifier to suck on during the procedure, Lusk said. Others receive general anesthesia and get the operation done in a clinic.

The wounds—having been wrapped in gauze and petroleum jelly—usually heal within one month, she said.

Still, as a new mother, Bell couldn’t bear to think of her son undergoing the cut, and she may be ahead of her time.

“It’s weird for me now to see boys who are circumcised,” she said. “Why cut on something you don’t need to cut on?”

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