

Death and the New Penis

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Introduction

A procedure repeated three thousand times a day, a million of times a year, no matter how safe, will eventually lead to fatal results when even a miniscule mortality risk is applied to that number. Eventually, the odds catch up with you. For some parents it will mean losing a child to what their doctor promised was a safe procedure. A review of the literature provides a rough estimate of one hundred circumcision-related deaths annually in the United States, about two per week. All were avoidable, since infant circumcision is elective.

The numbers

That circumcision can lead to death is rare, but by no means impossible or unheard of. Doctors have cautioned about circumcision-related deaths for over fifty years, and instances of circumcision-related deaths are numerous in the literature and media. Several researchers have given estimates for circumcision mortality.

During one period, Speert reported 566,483 circumcisions were performed in New York City with one operative death.ⁱ Any deaths post-operatively, or post-release were not recorded.

My research into circumcision rates revealed that on average, 16 boys die during in the same hospital stay as their circumcision every year.ⁱⁱ Are all of these circumcision-related? It is unlikely that any of these boys were circumcised after their death. And, it is unlikely that any were circumcised while being treated for some life-threatening condition that ultimately caused their death. Therefore, we can cautiously assume most were due to complications arising from their circumcision. This number would not include deaths following their hospital release.

Gairdner surveyed hospital records that reported 95 deaths attributed to circumcision between 1942-47 in England and Wales from 90,000 circumcisions of boys aged 0-4 years.ⁱⁱⁱ He found that there were 17.6 deaths per 100,000 annually (including post-operative risk).

At the other end of the spectrum, Dr. John B. Brunetti, Head Start Administration for Children's Services of New York, stated at the 2001 Early Head Start national conference in Washington, DC that 2000 babies die each year from the practice of unnecessary circumcisions; at which point the entire assembly hall is said to have taken a collective gasp and responded with dead silence.^{iv}

Infant boys, in general, are more likely to die than girls, making this author wonder what effect circumcising more than half of our boys is having? According to National Vital Statistics Report, Death: Leading Causes for 2001, deaths for both sexes where the cause of death is "certain conditions originating in the perinatal period" is: males, 44 (0.6 per 100,000), females, 28 (0.4).^v They also list bacterial sepsis of newborn males results in 380 deaths (18.5/100,000), and 256 neonatal hemorrhages (12.4/100,000) annually. Bacterial sepsis is the 6th leading cause of neonatal death followed by 9th place hemorrhage.^{vi} Both are the most common complications of circumcision.

Despite modern medicine and new medicines, infant mortality is on the rise, from 6.8 infant deaths per 1000 live births (2003) to 7.0 per thousand (2004).^{vii}

The estimate

So how many circumcision-related deaths are there in the US? There are no recorded statistics on this since medical records list the cause of death, not what precipitated it. Using what information we have, we can begin to estimate the problem.

For good measure, let's remove Speert's low value of 2, and Brunetti's high value of 2000.

The reported deaths from Solucient's data in my white paper do not include post-operative, post-release deaths. Some deaths by hemorrhage and most deaths by infection are post-release and not captured in their

data giving us what may be a solid minimum number of sixteen per year. The true number is likely more than this.

A number of researchers have misapplied Gairdner's death ratio to the United States. The most often seen number of deaths per year is 229 and 230.^{viii} The problem arises when his ratio for children under the age of five is applied to infants under the age of 1, or even neonates.

Using Gairdner's data, but allowing for ages, current British infectious disease mortality ratios, and post-war circumcision patterns, we find that the mortality risk for boys 0-1 years of age is 16.0 per 100,000, or one out of every 6250. At the United State's current circumcising frequency of 1.26 million this equates to 202 deaths per year, all things being equal. However, this is for boys up to one year old. The death rate for neonates will be higher than this ratio. This does not allow for improvements in healthcare from post-war Britain to present day America, where more powerful antibiotics are available to fight infections. At the same time, the deadly MRSA has broken out in American hospitals, maternity wards, and beginning to spread to the community. Circumcised boys are known to be at much higher risk than girls or intact boys.^{ix}

Researcher	Est. Deaths per Year U.S.
Speert	2
Bollinger	16
Gairdner ratio applied	202
Brunetti	2000

A reasonable figure – if one can call avoidable infant death reasonable – is about 100 deaths per year, or two per week.

The background

Few human feelings compare to the profound grief after the loss of a child. Adding guilt to that grief – from the realization that it was elective – is beyond what many people can tolerate. At the same time, doctors and hospitals seek to avoid attention about a surgical mishap of an easily avoidable death. The Circumcision Information Resource Pages, an edited online library, has this to say about doctor's involvement in circumcision-related deaths:

Doctors are highly motivated to conceal the true cause of circumcision death. Neonatal circumcision has no medical indication and is now considered to be an unnecessary non-therapeutic operation. It is unethical to carry out such operations on minors who cannot consent for themselves. Consequently, most doctors who have a baby die after a circumcision would prefer to attribute the results of his unethical operation to secondary causes, such as infection or bleeding, while ignoring the primary cause, which is the circumcision that resulted in the infection or bleeding. It is, therefore, very hard to identify the total number of deaths that occur from circumcision. One senses that one is seeing only the "tip of the iceberg," with the vast majority of deaths from circumcision being concealed. The deaths undoubtedly cause an increase in infant mortality. Male infant mortality is higher than female infant mortality. It is not known how much of this increased mortality is due to the practice of male circumcision.

Much of the literature on circumcision minimizes or simply ignores the risk of death from circumcision. Other than the Gairdner survey in post-war Britain, there has been no significant investigation into how many infant deaths are the results of this parental elected penile reduction surgery.

The most commonly performed surgery in the United States, parents are not told death is a possible consequence of the surgery.

Complications from circumcision are as high as 58%, says a study where the infants were examined in the home by the researcher weeks after their circumcision. Infection, a major cause of death for infants, is the other complication avoided by not circumcising. Eight percent of boys become infected after being circumcised. Seven of these after hospital release. While 88% of circumcision-related infections do not present themselves until after the boy is released from the hospital.^x

Indifference to circumcision-related deaths isn't solely an American trait. Each year in Africa, about 200 boys die from circumcision-related deaths, leading the editor of the South African Medical Journal to say the, "Modern day ritual is largely a hoax,"^{xi} and for the South African legislator to propose a law to prohibiting male circumcision.^{xii} A bill prohibiting male circumcision is passed the South African legislature.

A Pakistani study estimated an overall risk of about 16 fatal neonatal tetanus cases per 1000 live boy births with circumcision wounds if left untreated.^{xiii}

The Jewish religion is not quiet on circumcision-related deaths. Jews circumcise a boy that dies before his burial if he does not live to be ritually circumcised on his 8th day. And, Jews give dispensation from circumcision for a child that might die due to having a bleeding disorder.

Circumcision proponents are quick to say circumcision prevents deaths due to penile cancer. What they don't go on to say is the risk-to-benefit ratio. World famous pediatrician Dr. Sydney Gellis believed that, "there are more deaths from complications of circumcision than from cancer of the penis."^{xiv}

Why don't we hear more about these deaths? If they were school shootings we would hear about every one. About 36 children, mostly boys, were killed in schoolyard shootings in the academic year 1997-98,^{xv} one-third the estimated deaths due to circumcision.

All men die including circumcised ones. The ethical question is what is his quality of life in between the *cut* and the *coffin*? Dr. Timothy Moss, genito-urinary consultant, says, "At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is estimated that currently some 647 million males (23% of the world male population) face death without experiencing expression of their sexuality with intact genitalia. This is a psychosexual tragedy."^{xvi}

Discussion about circumcision related deaths are not new, doctors have known about the risk for decades. Robert S. Mendelsohn, M.D., professor of pediatrics at Northwestern, in his 1984 parenting book "How to Raise a Healthy Child. . . Despite Your Doctor" states,

"If your doctor suggests circumcision for your baby boy, ask him why he wants to expose the poor kid to the pain, the possibility of infection or hemorrhage, and the **risk of death** from surgery that has no medical justification."^{xvii} (emphasis mine)

Any unnecessary surgery that causes death is a good one to avoid. If hundreds of children were dying from other avoidable causes, say tattoos or ear piercing, people would rightfully be outraged at the operators and institutions benefiting financially.

While this is not a reliable estimate, it is sufficient to act as a wake up call and encourage researchers, activists, parents, human rights lawyers, and ethicists to look into the unnecessary deaths of babies. Doctors have been warning the public about circumcision-related death for over fifty years, during which time about 5,000 boys have needlessly died, and it is past time to take action.

References

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ⁱⁱⁱ Gairdner D. The fate of the foreskin: a study of circumcision. Br Med J 1949;2:1433-7.

^{iv} Correspondence from two attendees to author, 2001

^v NCHS, Deaths: Leading Causes for 2001. NVSR Volume 52, Number 9. 86 pp. (PHS) 2004-1120., table 1, p. 13.

^{vi} NCHS, Deaths: Leading Causes for 2001. NVSR Volume 52, Number 9. 86 pp. (PHS) 2004-1120., table 3, p. 71.

^{vii} http://www.drgreene.com/21_1752.html

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^{ix} <http://www.doctorsopposingcircumcision.org/DOC/mrsa.html>

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