

The Unkindest Cut

Circumcision is not something most people think about. If they did, they'd learn that it can cause deformity and death and is as unnecessary and lamentable as amputating a healthy finger, says **J. Steven Svoboda '91**. But because circumcision is tied to the seldom-discussed subjects of male sexuality and health, he says, the practice continues by many who never consider its consequences.



J. Steven Svoboda '91, holding his son, accepts an award on behalf of his work with Attorneys for the Rights of the Child, a legal practice that focuses on circumcision.

Founder and director of Attorneys for the Rights of the Child, Svoboda educates and litigates on behalf of the burgeoning anticircumcision cause. His organization, launched five years ago in Berkeley, Calif., is the only legal practice devoted to the issue, according to Svoboda. Doing this work enables him to practice public interest law in an underserved area, he says.

"I see a lot of harm from this procedure. I don't see a lot of lawyers working on it," Svoboda said. "I'm here because nobody else is and I think it is an important issue."

While the organization also works to prevent female genital cutting, it focuses on male circumcision because of its prevalence in the United States. Through educational campaigns directed at the general public and the legal bar, Svoboda contends that circumcision takes away the protection of the foreskin and reduces erogenous function. In

addition, according to Svoboda, more than 200 boys die each year from the procedure, and many others lose their penis or substantial portions of it. The organization refers potential plaintiffs harmed by circumcision to attorneys familiar with the issue and serves as an ongoing resource in lawsuits.

Even for those not obviously damaged by circumcision, the procedure is simply never

necessary and is not endorsed by any national medical association, says Svoboda. A surgical procedure should not be performed, he says, unless there is a proven need. "It's been twisted around to the point that we do [circumcision] unless you can prove otherwise, and I think that is a cultural thing. It's not based on medical reality," he said. "There is no other culturally based procedure that physicians are performing."

The pressure to have a boy circumcised remains strong in this country, he says. The notion that a boy must "look like his father" is ingrained in many people, who are often confused by conflicting information available on the practice, says Svoboda. Yet the number of circumcisions performed in the United States has diminished, from a peak of 85 percent decades ago to below 60 percent today, according to Svoboda.

The decreasing popularity of the procedure coincided with the rise of the anticircumcision movement in the '70s, when the American Academy of Pediatrics announced that there is no medical need for circumcision and Dr. Benjamin Spock spoke out against it. The cause's first major organization, the National Organization of Circumcision Information Resource Center, was founded in 1986 and this year presented Svoboda with a human rights award. And a passion for human rights is why he does this work, he says. He won't talk about whether he's circumcised; he says it's irrelevant. The movement includes Muslims and Jews (who each traditionally circumcise their boys), Christians and atheists, women, and circumcised and uncircumcised men, linked only by their desire to stop this practice.

While ideally circumcision should be outlawed, Svoboda says, the more pragmatic path is to show people that circumcision should no longer be a part of the culture, so that it would become as antiquated as, say, foot binding now is in China. That will eventually happen, he believes.

"Every culture develops a rationale for why this particular practice makes sense and vilifies the other practices," said Svoboda. "I think we're in a process of unlearning those things. I think it takes a while. It's a long road, but I think we're going down that road."

--Lewis Rice

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