

# CIRCUMCISION...MY POSITION

## Mark D. Reiss, M.D. (revised 2003)

I am a 69 year old retired physician, a Jew who is an active member of a Conservative synagogue, and a grandfather.

When I was in Medical School in the 1950s, almost all newborn males were circumcised. Despite the fact that prophylactic surgery was not generally performed, we were taught that circumcision was the correct and healthy thing to do. It was thought to control masturbation, decrease cancer risk, and help curtail sexually transmitted diseases. We learned nothing of foreskin anatomy and function. Infant nervous systems were thought to be undeveloped and their pain was so trivialized that it was almost ignored. As a young physician, I participated in many circumcisions. Over the years I've witnessed *brit milah* in the homes of friends and family. I was mildly uncomfortable with the practice, but like most physicians, and like most Jews, I said and did nothing to question circumcision.

Three years ago, as I was about to become a grandfather for the first time, my interest in the subject became more focused. I learned that more and more physicians now realize that any potential benefits of circumcision are far outweighed by its risks and drawbacks. The American Academy of Pediatrics has stated that "Routine circumcision is not necessary". Whether done by a physician in the hospital, or a *mohel* in a ritual *brit milah*, the procedure has significant complication rates of infection, hemorrhage and even death. Mortality may actually be higher than thought since some of these deaths have not been attributed to circumcision, but listed only under their secondary causes, such as hemorrhage or infection. I've learned of the very important role the foreskin has in the protection of the head of the penis in the infant, and in sexual functioning in adulthood. It has also been shown that the newborn feels pain even more acutely than adults do, and that many of the infants who stop crying during circumcision are actually in a state of traumatic shock. To my amazement I learned that the USA is now the **only** country in the world routinely circumcising babies for non-religious reasons.

With these overwhelming reasons not to circumcise, I began to look at the practice of ritual circumcision in the Jewish community and I learned that: circumcision is *not* an identity issue. You do not **need** to be circumcised to be Jewish any more than the need to observe many other Jewish laws. The bottom line is this: if your mother is Jewish, you are Jewish, period. And in the Reform tradition, patrilineal descent is also accepted. Among Jews in Europe (only 40% of newborn Jewish boys in Sweden are being circumcised), South America, and even in Israel, circumcision is not universal. Growing numbers of American Jews are now leaving their sons intact as they view circumcision as a part of Jewish law that they can no longer accept. Alternative *brit b'li milah* or *brit shalom* ceremonies (ritual naming ceremony without cutting) are being performed by some rabbis. Increasing numbers of intact boys are going to religious school, having *bar mitzvahs*, and taking their place as young adults in the Jewish community.

As a Jewish grandfather, I want to assure young couples about to bring a child into the world, that there are other members of the Jewish “older” generation, including other Jewish physicians, and even some rabbis, who feel as I do. If your heart and instincts tell you to leave your son intact, listen