

*Sunday September 9, 2012*

## **Just because we've always done it**

By Jim Taylor

Canadian law is clear about female genital mutilation – since 1997 it has been outlawed, period. But Canadian law says nothing at all about male genital mutilation.

Many people would question whether circumcision even qualifies as mutilation. We certainly didn't think of it as mutilation when we had our son "done" in 1961. Back then, circumcision was taken for granted. Rather like tonsillectomies. Better to get rid of troublesome body parts than risk trouble later.

Some recent studies support that claim.

The American Academy of Pediatrics declared that circumcision reduced the likelihood of penile cancer in North America by up to two-thirds. And in Africa, circumcision apparently reduced the transmission of HIV/AIDs by 50 per cent.

Those statistics sound impressive. They're also misleading.

In Africa, for example, the use of condoms – or, if you can imagine it, abstinence – would reduce HIV/AIDs transmission by closer to 100 per cent.

And in North America, the lifetime risk of developing penile cancer is about one in 1500. Let's put that in context – by circumcising 1500 baby boys, you might save one of them from developing penile cancer.

## **If prevention is the goal...**

Testicular cancer is about eight times more common than penile cancer. Among adult males under 35, it's the most common form of cancer. From a prevention perspective, wouldn't it make more sense to castrate all male infants?

Some cancer specialists now believe that every male – yes, 100 per cent – will eventually develop prostate cancer. Most men don't die from it, because it's a very slow-acting cancer. But significant numbers do.

Removing every infant's prostate would... well, you can see what I'm getting at.

The real question is, why circumcise at all?

And the obvious answer is, because we've always done it.

For Jews and Muslims, it's a religious obligation, a symbolic act identifying a covenant made by God with their ancient patriarch, Abraham. According to Genesis 17, God commanded, "Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you."

Frank Dimant of B'nai B'rith Canada, a Jewish advocacy organization, said "It is unbelievable that a law would be enacted in Canada that would preclude Jews from circumcising sons at the time of birth.

"This is...one of the absolute critical tenets of our faith and we have complied with that commandment for thousands of years."

## **Not absolute**

But the Bible itself suggests that the Jewish people did not always consider circumcision mandatory. Moses did not bother circumcising his own son, until just before he returned to Egypt to lead the Hebrew slaves to freedom. And the book of Joshua (5:5-7) states that the escaped slaves did not circumcise any newborn males during their 40 years in the desert.

For Christians, the church's first great evangelist, the apostle Paul, argued that circumcision was unnecessary – and won.

Medical opinion has largely turned against circumcision. The rate has now dropped to about 20 per cent in Canada, around three per cent in the Scandinavian countries, but still hovers around 50 per cent in the U.S.

In B.C., circumcision is no longer covered by the province's Medical Services Plan. The College of Physicians and Surgeons deems it "medically unnecessary intervention." As elective surgery, the operation moves into privatized medical care.

In 2006, the last year for which I could find statistics, Victoria's General Hospital performed only two circumcisions. I found web references for two Victoria doctors who do private circumcisions – about ten a week. A Vancouver doctor claims to have done over 30,000 in his clinic, with each operation taking about 30 seconds.

At around \$75 in Canada, \$400 in the U.S., circumcision becomes highly profitable.

For that reason, a group called Doctors Opposing Circumcision charges the American Academy of Pediatrics with a conflict of interest. It is hugely profitable, DOC states, for the AAP's 60,000 members to perpetuate circumcision.

## Psychological damage?

What does it do to the child? Extreme opponents claim it leaves a lifelong trauma, a distrust of authority, a predisposition to violence and bloodshed. I reserve judgement.

More biologically, neurologists argue a foreskin shields the sensitive nerve endings in the penis itself and also has its own millions of nerve endings. Both functions enhance sexual enjoyment. Men without a foreskin literally cannot know what they're missing.

I started writing this column thinking that I had no opinion about the validity of circumcision. I was not committed to it by religion; I viewed it as a minor medical procedure, no more serious than removing a wart.

Now I believe that circumcision may once have had hygienic validity for desert nomads – lacking water for washing, lacking medical insight into the causes of some afflictions. But in a modern society, where both hygiene and knowledge are widely available, I no longer see any justification for the archaic ritual of snipping off an infant's foreskin.

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## YOUR TURN

You seem to have liked last week's column, about corporate negligence and responsibility.

Jack Drieger put it this way: "This issue of Sharp Edges should appear in all of Canada's dailies, as a letter to the editor at least."

Donna Crook asked if she could put it on her Facebook page, in the hope that more people might read it. I said yes.

And John Cameron wrote, "Your column was 100% appropriate for Labour Day weekend. Society is expert at passing laws, but are ignoramuses at enforcing same."

John Willems wrote from Medicine Hat to remind me that it is not only corporate executives who are guilty of causing unnecessary deaths: "Sadly, church history reminds us that we too are guilty. We have killed, isolated, and taken advantage of the poor. I wonder, when my relatives were drowned because of their faith being different than the ones doing the drowning, did the ones responsible for the action cheer? Did they pay? Did they sleep at night?"

"It seems that responsibility is elastic and greedy. Taking responsibility has been a problem since before "Am I my brother's keeper?" was thought."

John also wondered, "Why is it again that a drug company in Germany took 50 years to take responsibility for children born without limbs?"

Isabel Gibson thought I had over-stated my argument by dragging Hitler into it: "He had a studied policy of exterminating the Jews and other 'undesirables'. I'll give corporate executives the benefit of the doubt on this -- I

don't expect they hold a studied policy of exterminating their workers. It's far subtler -- and, therefore, harder to deal with--than that.

“There is something about operating within a group structure that dulls our moral sense. All the more reason, in my mind, to have tough-on-corporate-negligence laws that actually work.”

Cliff Boldt thanked me for “tweaking of consciences out in the real world.”

“People 'below' a certain layer of a bureaucracy take their cues from above. Same in the military. Investigate a serious military problem and you'll find the grunts take the gas, but no one questions the generals.”

And Cliff wondered, “If a person dies waiting for a medical treatment or because their situation doesn't meet public policy criteria, how about [holding] the Minister of Health or premier [responsible]?”

Art Gans felt a bit pessimistic: “The problem of corporate crime is completely embedded in the justification of corporate personhood and of capitalism as practised in North America and Europe in general. Nothing should affect the bottom line, particularly nothing that is going to cost the company profit.

“The idea of corporate responsibility has been done away with by the legal principle of ‘humanizing the company with human rights.’ That, unfortunately has a long legal history, particularly in the U.S. Take any business ethics course and you will find a general principle enunciated, ‘if it's legal, it's ok.’ And even if it's illegal, if you can get away with it, it's ok. Individualism always trumps anything resembling community rights, particularly when it might affect the company's profits. The boss always wins, one way or another.”

Charles Hill in Texas was equally acerbic: “Welcome to capitalism! Who do you think is bankrolling the legislators who create the laws?”

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you'll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca).

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## TECHNICAL STUFF

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If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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## PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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