

Belgian federal committee rules against ritual circumcision

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A Belgian federal government committee has ruled against the circumcision of infant boys for reasons other than medical necessity.

The Committee for Bio-Ethics ruled that bodily integrity was more important than religious faith.

"As circumcision is irreversible and therefore a radical operation, we find the physical integrity of the child takes precedence over the belief system of the parents," said Marie-Geneviève Pinsar, the committee's chair.

The committee was responding to a question posed by a group of doctors from Brussels in 2014. It said it took three years to make its decision because of the question's religious and cultural importance. Estimates in Belgium suggest 15% of men are circumcised.

The decision will not be binding in law, but it adds to the growing weight of medical opinion against unnecessary male circumcision. In 2010 the Royal Dutch Medical Society (KNMG) [advised](#) doctors to discourage parents from having their sons circumcised, urging "a strong policy of deterrence".

It said "non-therapeutic circumcision of male minors is a violation of children's rights to autonomy and physical integrity" and added that the procedure can cause complications including bleeding, infection, urethral stricture and panic attacks.

KNMG said any medical advantages of circumcision were significantly outnumbered by the risks and other disadvantages, such as the loss of up to 30% of erogenous tissue.

In 2013 an international group of physicians [criticised](#) the American Academy of Paediatrics for promoting infant male circumcision. The Council of Europe adopted a non-binding resolution advising member states not to allow the ritual circumcision of children unconditionally, at least for very young children. The Scandinavian children's ombudsmen issued a [joint statement](#) saying children should be allowed to choose for themselves.

And in 2016 the Danish Medical Association said circumcision should only be performed with "informed consent".

Children's right to physical integrity and protection from physical injury is protected by the International Treaty on the Rights of the Child.

The National Secular Society is committed to [ending](#) non-consensual surgery on children when it is performed for religious rather than medical reasons. Antony Lempert, of its Secular Medical Forum, commented:

"The decision by the Belgian government's ethics committee is a welcome addition to the growing international consensus that the surgical assignment of a child's genitals with the religious or cultural preferences of their parents violates medical ethics, even when the child is a boy born into

a Jewish or Muslim community.

"That these religious communities feel strongly about the practice of ritual male genital cutting is undeniably the main reason why many have shied away from tackling this practice. Babies can neither resist nor complain yet many adult men are now describing their horror at what was done to them in the name of someone else's beliefs and some have spoken of the lifelong complications. Many within the religious communities themselves are also turning away from the practice in order to protect their children from what is now known to cause significant and irreversible harm.

"Child safeguarding procedures have been developed precisely because parents and cultures cannot and do not always protect the children in their care from harm. To deny a child the most basic of protection from permanent bodily modification especially on the most sensitive and private part of his body is undeniably a violation of his rights.

"UK law should be applied consistently. Repeatedly, UK judges have ruled to protect children from similar and arguably less severe practices on the grounds that the child cannot be assumed to have a belief system and must be guaranteed bodily integrity until they are old enough to make informed decisions about their own body. In the SMF we have long argued that the application of the same principles should result in an immediate end to the cutting of any child's healthy genitals for religious or cultural reasons."

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