

Ritual infant circumcision “morally impermissible”, say experts

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The religious and cultural circumcision of non-consenting boys is "morally impermissible" and should be considered together with non-consensual female genital cutting, according to a panel of experts.

An [article](#) published in *The American Journal of Bioethics* in September says efforts should be made to "protect all nonconsenting persons, regardless of sex or gender, from medically unnecessary genital cutting".

Medically Unnecessary Genital Cutting and the Rights of the Child: Moving Toward Consensus says the moral reasons for opposing non-consensual female genital cutting apply to anyone unable to give their consent.

The paper argues that under most conditions, "cutting any person's genitals without their informed consent is a serious violation of their right to bodily integrity".

"As such, it is morally impermissible unless the person is nonautonomous (incapable of consent) and the cutting is medically necessary."

It also warns of a "collision course" in Western countries, owing to the disparity in legal protections afforded to boys, intersex children and girls.

The article says "the ethics of female, male, and intersex cutting must be considered together". It says all are "medically unnecessary" acts of genital cutting, performed mainly on young children "on behalf of norms, beliefs or values that may not be the child's own".

The paper also raises a [recent US federal court case](#) in which a judge said a law prohibiting female genital mutilation did not protect children in a non-discriminatory fashion, as it was specific to girls only.

National Secular Society campaigns officer Megan Manson said the article "should prompt policy-makers to seriously reconsider the current widespread acceptance of non-medical circumcision on non-consenting boys".

"Experts who have carefully considered the ethics of genital cutting have once again concluded that non-consensual, non-therapeutic male circumcision is no more morally permissible than cutting girls' genitals.

"As the harm caused by male circumcision becomes increasingly recognised, we should broaden the legal protections that girls already have to all children, regardless of sex or religious background. Female, male and intersex children should all have the same basic human right to bodily integrity.

"And this is also a reminder that extending the protections would strengthen them. If we continue to treat genital cutting inconsistently, we can expect advocates for FGM to

continue to argue for the 'right' to cut girls as well as boys."

The paper's authors

- The paper was written by The Brussels Collaboration on Bodily Integrity, a group of experts in medicine, law, ethics and other relevant fields. Dr Antony Lempert, chair of the NSS's [Secular Medical Forum](#), is a member of the group.
- The group also includes James Chegwiddden, a barrister at Old Square Chambers, and Brian Earp, Associate Director of the Program in Ethics and Health Policy at Yale University and The Hastings Center. Chegwiddden and Earp have both spoken about genital cutting at NSS events including the [2018 Healthcare & Secularism Conference](#).

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