

NSS urges rethink of laissez-faire approach to male genital cutting

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The National Secular Society has urged the children's commissioner for England to encourage child protection agencies and the government to rethink their approach to male circumcision.

In a letter to Anne Longfield, the NSS has said all children should be protected from non-therapeutic genital cutting, regardless of the religion, belief or traditions of their parents.

The letter comes in light of an acclaimed recent academic article which argued that [the UK's legal approach to male genital cutting was "indefensible"](#) and "must be changed" to protect children.

Contents of NSS letter

In the letter, the NSS said:

- Forced genital cutting of boys is "an irreversible, gross violation of their human rights" which is "largely dismissed as inconsequential or falsely claimed to have therapeutic value";
- Children, and particularly young infants, are incapable of consenting to medically unnecessary and harmful procedures;
- The right to practice religion under article nine of the European Convention on Human Rights is a qualified right, which is subject to the "rights and freedoms of others";
- The permissive attitude to forced genital cutting on boys is in breach of the UN convention on the rights of the child. The convention recommends respect for children's rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and advises that traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children should be abolished.

NSS comment

NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said: "The children's commissioner has a vital role to play in ensuring children's best interests are properly considered.

"We're therefore urging her to use her position to help to tackle a widespread and significant violation of many children's basic rights. Children should have the ability to grow up in their own bodies and make their own decisions about altering them.

"Child safeguarding must take precedence over adults' wishes to express their beliefs through the cutting of children's genitals."

Support for change

The NSS's letter also highlighted growing criticism of the current laissez-faire approach to male circumcision:

- Recent court rulings in the UK have recognised that the best interests of children would best be guaranteed by deferring any operation until they were old enough to participate in the decision-making process.

- In 2018 the Child Rights International Network, an advocacy group, called the ritual circumcision of infant males for non-medical reasons [a "violation of bodily integrity"](#) which "unnecessarily" exposes children to risks.
- A joint statement by the Nordic children's ombudsmen in September 2013 [condemned non-therapeutic infant circumcision](#) as violating fundamental medical-ethical principles.
- In January 2015, the head of the family division of the High Court in England and Wales said non-therapeutic infant male [circumcision caused "significant harm"](#) to boys.
- International human rights bodies such as the [Council of Europe](#), [doctors](#), [medical ethicists](#) and [lawyers](#) are also among those who have recently questioned the historic carte blanche afforded to infant male circumcision.

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