

A woman is convicted over circumcision. What happens next?

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A pharmacist has been convicted for having a baby boy circumcised against his parents' wishes. Megan Manson says the case raises alarming questions over our willingness to defend children's bodily integrity consistently.

On Tuesday, Martina Obi-Uzom was [found guilty](#) of causing grievous bodily harm to an 11 month old baby boy. She was entrusted to look after the baby while his parents went away one weekend. During that weekend, she took the baby to London to be circumcised, in accordance with her own Nigerian Christian beliefs. She knew the baby's mother did not want her baby circumcised. So she posed as the child's mother, recruited a man to pose as his father, and convinced a Jewish circumciser to perform the procedure.

The case is a particularly horrifying example of the harm caused by imposing one's religious beliefs on another person. That one of the perpetrators has been brought to justice is a positive step for those campaigning for children's rights. But there are still a number of questions unanswered.

Why was the sentence so light?

Let's not understate the seriousness of what happened. Obi-Uzom took a defenceless baby entrusted to her care to a man who held him down, took up a knife and did painful, irreversible injury to the most intimate part of his body.

Had the baby been an adult, this would have been treated as an extremely serious assault, perhaps even a sexual assault, and imprisonment would have been inevitable for the perpetrator. Or had the baby been female, this would have instantly been recognised as child abuse and termed Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), which is explicitly prohibited in UK law. In March, a Ugandan woman was [sentenced](#) to eleven years in jail for cutting her three year old daughter's genitals. The judge said what she had done was "barbaric, sickening, child abuse".

But Obi-Uzom will not go to jail. She was given a suspended sentence of 14 months. She was also ordered to pay costs of £1,500 and a £140 victim surcharge, which seems paltry compensation for amputating part of a person's genitals without consent or medical need. Last month a man was [awarded](#) £20,000 for being circumcised by mistake at Leicester General Hospital.

Judge Freya Newbery said although the offence merited a prison sentence, "circumstances" meant she decided to suspend the sentence. The judge said she accepted that Obi-Uzom's intention "wasn't to harm the boy" and that she was of "impeccable character". She also said she was a "professional person" and "highly qualified".

It will strike many people as bizarre to describe a woman who took a baby in her care to have his genitals cut in defiance of his mother's wishes, and used highly deceitful means to do this, as of "impeccable character".

It will also strike many people as irrelevant that she is a "highly qualified", "professional" person; why should one's education and occupation entitle someone to leniency in such a case? It could be argued that Obi-Uzom's profession – a pharmacist – means she should have known better. Her high level of education, which would involve specialist knowledge in healthcare, means she is in a better position to understand the harms and risks of circumcision than the average person, not to mention the ethics surrounding parental and patient consent.

Will action be taken against the cutter and co-conspirator?

Obi-Uzom is not the only party responsible for cutting the baby's penis. The procedure itself was performed by a *mohel*; a person who circumcises babies according to Jewish rites. Obi-Uzom presented herself as the baby's mother, and brought with her a man posing as his father. She signed a parental consent form which the mohel accepted at face value.

Obi-Uzom is 70 years old. Her visibly advanced age should have at least rung alarm bells for the mohel because it would be highly unlikely for a woman of her age to have had a baby. Why did he accept her as the mother with no questions asked?

In addition, we do not know any further details of the man Obi-Uzom recruited to pose as the father. In doing so, he too was party to the non-consensual cutting of a healthy baby's genitals through deceptive means. Will he be facing prosecution?

Will Obi-Uzom continue to run a pharmacy?

Obi-Uzom is not merely an employee of The Lighthouse Pharmacy. She's the [director](#). Pharmacists must be [registered](#) with the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC). Criminal conduct, as well as dishonest behaviour and "serious unprofessional or inappropriate behaviour", can result in [sanctions](#) from the GPhC including removal from the register.

Will GPhC be investigating Obi-Uzom's suitability to continue her profession as a pharmacist, in light of causing grievous bodily harm to a child without his consent and in defiance of the wishes of his parents? Her suitability to remain in a position of responsibility for people's healthcare must be called into question.

Why is the parents' consent the central issue, and not the child's?

The question we all must ask is why parental consent should determine whether or not non-consensual cutting of a boy's healthy penis is grievous bodily harm.

The judge said the lack of parental consent "is what is missing here". She added that circumcision "can only be lawful with the consent of parents".

And herein lies the real problem. What's *really* missing here is the lack of consent from the person being circumcised – the child. Whether or not the parents want the procedure should not be the central issue. In the case of the Ugandan woman sent to jail for FGM, it's clear that she wanted her daughter's genitals cut. But UK law regards FGM as child abuse, no matter how sincerely parents may believe it is in the best interest of their daughters to be cut. And rightly so.

At last year's [Healthcare & Secularism conference](#), barrister James Chegwidan argued that non-therapeutic circumcision on non-consenting children is incompatible with many facets of the law. It's at odds with criminal law because court cases have established that religious reasons cannot be used to justify other forms of physical assault on children, including scarification and

flagellation. It's at odds with civil law because it violates the child's right to bodily autonomy. And it's at odds with the laws of freedom of belief and conscience because it ignores that child's right not have his parents' religion imposed on him.

The many unanswered questions and unsatisfying outcomes in this case underline the need to urgently challenge non-therapeutic, non-consensual male circumcision. Too many people, for too long, have been painfully and permanently altering boys' genitals without question. The notion that parental consent makes this legitimate flies in the face of our 21st century understanding of human rights. Our laws already protect girls' rights to intact genitals – it's high time we extend that protection to boys.

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Megan Manson is the head of policy & research at the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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