



Won't Cut It: Dr. Morris Sorrells, who once performed circumcisions in the routine manner of most U.S. pediatricians, has since stopped performing them and believes that the procedure is medically unnecessary. The Alameda-based pediatrician, a member of both Raising Our Sons Intact and Doctors Opposing Circumcision, is holding 12-week-old Julian Traiman.

Willy Nilly

Foreskin restoration advocates hope for healing as they fight a long and sensitive battle against circumcision

By Mary Spicuzza

RIO CRUZ IS NOT the least bit embarrassed to be sitting here talking to a female reporter, a complete stranger, about his penis. He tells me, quite frankly, that fixing it is really a do-it-yourself process. Others have opted for the full scrotal graft, but Cruz, the founder and executive co-director of the International Coalition for Genital Integrity, decided that for his foreskin restoration, the long haul was better than a quick--and risky--surgical fix.

"You just stretch what skin you have left, and keep it under constant tension for a year and a

half to two years," the Santa Cruz-based activist says dryly. "It's a dumb process, and I'm pissed that I had to do it. But it is meant to take control, and restore some of the sensitivity that's been lost due to circumcision."

As silver-haired Cruz sits in his peaceful Santa Cruz home, which is painted nursery-inspired pastel shades outside and dotted inside with his brightly colored artwork, he admits that he doesn't expect all the guys on his block to join in the movement. But Cruz is hardly a lone warrior: his coalition represents 17 different pro-prepuce groups spread across the globe.

Actual statistics are difficult to gather, but Tim Hammond, founder of the National Organization to Halt the Abuse and Routine Mutilation of Males ([NOHARMM](#)), says Cruz is one of thousands of men worldwide attempting to reclaim their foreskins. Whether using a surgical procedure or the more popular stretching method, pioneered by Brothers United for Foreskin (BUFF), guys are starting the restoration process hoping to ease what they believe are lingering scars from circumcision.

Whether due to medical, religious or cultural reasons, about 13 million boys worldwide lose their foreskins each year. The tradition has existed for centuries in a cross-section of cultures, including Jewish and Muslim societies, some African groups, and, more recently, mainstream America. But the determined crew on the cutting edge of the foreskin restoration movement say the circumcision tradition is nothing more than barbaric genital mutilation that must be stopped.

Under the Knife

DR. MORRIS SORRELLS has cut foreskins by the hundreds. During his stint in medical school during the '50s, Sorrells says, doctors weren't even discussing circumcision. But the

Alameda-based pediatrician, now a member of both [Raising Our Sons Intact](#) and [Doctors Opposing Circumcision](#), says that even though practitioners weren't debating the procedure, just about all of them were doing it.

"When I was a junior in medical school, one of our jobs was to do the circumcisions. We would walk into the operating room, and here was a line of babies all strapped down," Sorrells says. "We would just go down the row and do one after another."

Historians say circumcision rituals have been performed since 3000 BCE, when ancient Egyptians cut the foreskin as a mark of slavery and a religious rite. Circumcision largely fell out of practice after Greeks and Romans forbade the practice. Yet it continued among Jews, Muslims, Australian aborigines and certain groups in Africa who still use it as a puberty ritual.

The medical procedure Sorrells speaks of didn't catch on in America until the Victorian era. After a series of creative experiments, late-19th-century doctors linked the foreskin to ailments ranging from gout and elephantiasis to bed-wetting, sexual perversion and insanity. Doctors like John Harvey Kellogg, fundamentalist health reformer and cornflakes creator, decided the foreskin needed to go.

Kellogg wrote, "The remedy for masturbation which is almost always successful in small boys is circumcision."

By the 1960s increasing numbers of doctors were questioning the circumcision tradition, a practice foreign to 85 percent of the world. But Sorrells says he didn't put down the scalpel for good until a baby boy experienced heavy bleeding while he was performing the procedure.

"It became real clear that this wasn't a good

medical procedure," he says. "Unfortunately, many doctors don't realize they're doing a surgery that is mutilating baby boys by removing healthy tissue. I've been angry at times, but I now believe that if we can reasonably point out the truth, people will understand that this is not necessary."

In the United States, doctors circumcised 1.3 million newborn males last year--an average of one foreskin severed every 20 minutes. Geoffrey T. Falk, founding director of the Circumcision Information and Resource Pages, says that over the last two years the total is closer to 5 million in America--most performed without anesthesia.

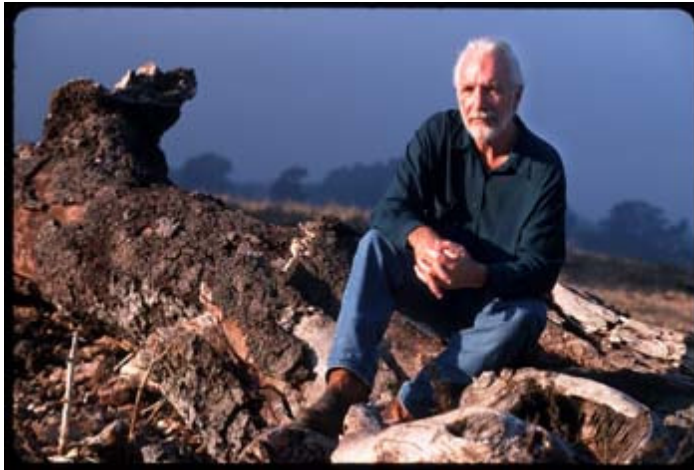
According to a statement released by the American Academy of Pediatrics last March, Sorrells is by no means a radical in his belief that routine circumcisions have no proven medical benefit. Last spring the academy declared that after analyzing 40 years of medical research on circumcision, it didn't find enough positive effects to recommend it as a standard procedure.

Those in the anti-circumcision movement applaud the academy's declaration, which echoes similar statements made as far back as 1971. But activists worry that it is too little, too late. With more than 200 babies dying each year from complications, according to Cruz, which range from excessive bleeding and infection to painful sores and swelling, circumcision opponents want doctors to condemn the practice.

George C. Denniston, M.D., president of Doctors Opposing Circumcision, says activists are distrustful because doctors haven't taken a stance. Despite the recent declaration, routine circumcisions continue across the country.

"More and more doctors are becoming aware, but many are still caught up in the mythology. Circumcision proponents will stop at nothing;

they will even argue that being intact [uncircumcised] increases your chance of getting AIDS," Seattle-based Denniston says. "But these doctors are not unbiased; they have blood on their hands from torturing and mutilating thousands of baby boys."



Cruz Control: Rio Cruz, the founder and executive co-director of the International Coalition for Genital Integrity, is an advocate of non-surgical foreskin restoration. 'It is meant to take control,' he says, 'and restore some of the sensitivity that's been lost due to circumcision.'

Wounded Warriors

CREATING A COMFORTABLE social space for a discussion about foreskin can be a difficult task. Just ask pro-prepuce activist Kenny Shults, a San Francisco therapist who used to run a support group for circumcised men.

"I was really confused and concerned about how to market and approach the issue. I just knew it should be really casual," Shults says. "But most men deal with the trauma by denial, and people get uncomfortable when you start poking holes in the way they deal with pain."

Although he eventually found people responded well to a light potluck atmosphere, he folded the group only a few months after it started.

Perhaps because tech-savvy white, middle-class men and women are spearheading the movement, the Internet has become a haven for

dozens of groups devoted to keeping the penis intact. Organizations on the web include Mothers Against Circumcision, [NORM](#) (National Organization of Restoring Men) and Attorneys for the Rights of the Child, a network of lawyers who advise circumcised men and their families suing doctors who perform the procedure.

The comprehensive Foreskin Restoration Ring and NORM offer links to an international network of anti-circumcision organizations as well as about 10 restoration diaries sharing different guys' experiences, some featuring progress photos and daily foreskin length measurements. One man shares his discovery that one-inch tape, perfect for stretching penile skin, can be found at the local pharmacy cheaper than at Shopper's Drugs. And R. Wayne Griffiths, founder of NORM, shares the close call when his Foreballs--a set of stainless steel bearings attached to loose skin with tape and used to stretch the restored foreskin--slipped while he was standing at a business associate's doorway.

Although most of the prepuce-friendly group founders are men, women have also spearheaded the movement. Marilyn Milos, the founder and director of the National Organization of Circumcision Information Resource Centers ([NOCIRC](#)), has devoted the last 21 years of her life to fighting for the intact penis. Milos, known as "Saint Marilyn" among many of the guys, got involved after witnessing a baby boy go under the scalpel.

"I saw a circumcision and it changed the course of my life," says Milos, a former nurse who says she still suffers post-traumatic stress from witnessing the procedure.

"Here was this little baby strapped spread-eagle like a rat, struggling against the restraints. And his screams got worse and worse, so bad he was

choking on his own cries. The doctor looked up and saw me crying, and said, 'There is no medical reason for doing this.' "

Milos witnessed a routine medical circumcision, in which the doctor clamps the penis into place, inserts a flat probe between the prepuce and the glans and cuts off the foreskin with a sharp knife. She says it is money, not medical concerns, fueling the circumcision tradition.

"It's a billion-dollar-a-year industry, between doctors, hospital costs, clamps and medical supplies," Milos says. "And with bioengineered skin tissue, they can get about a football-field worth of skin from one foreskin."

Covenant of the Flesh

YET FOR ORTHODOX RABBI and mohel Chanan Feld, circumcision isn't about modern medical debates over hygiene. The mild-mannered mohel, or one qualified to perform the Jewish rite of circumcision known as *brit milah*, and thousands of Jewish families believe that circumcision is the way to keep God's covenant with Abraham, meant for Abraham and all of his descendants.

"So shall my covenant be in your flesh and everlasting covenant," the Torah reads. "If any male who is uncircumcised fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his kin. He has broken my covenant."

Feld, a Berkeley-based rabbi who circumcises hundreds of baby boys each year, says he has probably performed the ceremony several thousand times since he became a mohel 14 years ago.

"It celebrates family, community and the extended family," Feld says. "The bris brings the baby into his world and his community, and into the large line of heritage."

Gadi Zohar's bris was an especially big event. Zohar, now a marriage and family therapist intern who works with sexually abused and circumcised men, says that he believes that his party was a part of a well-meaning but harmful tradition rooted in denial.

"It was meant well, but people out of ignorance mean well and don't realize the violation taking place," he says. "If you were in touch with the baby's feelings, you'd realize this is a painful and terrible thing."

Zohar believes that even though the emotional scars of circumcision are difficult to trace, the physical and psychological trauma on an infant run deep. He says many parents merely succumb to the time pressure--the Torah says babies should be circumcised when they are eight days old--without understanding Jewish history.

"Most of those people don't keep kosher, they drive on Saturday," Zohar says. "Yet somebody eating a Big Mac at McDonald's will say it's really important to cut their son's foreskin off."

Feld says anti-circumcision activists often try to drag him into debate, but he refuses to get swept up in a constant struggle to defend the Torah-mandated tradition.

"If you leave it in the realm of medicine, that's one thing," Feld says. "But the Jewish reasons are totally different."

Healing Old Wounds

IN HIS ARTICLE "Uncircumcised: Or How I Spent a Year and a Half Restoring My Butchered Foreskin," Rio Cruz describes in detail his long road to recovery. His chosen stretching method involved pulling remaining skin over the glans, and taping it in a way that provided the necessary tension while allowing urination. He says that after only a few weeks,

even before utilizing weights and elastic straps, his long-lost Before Circumcision (BC) sensitivity returned.

"OK, OK, it will never be exactly like it would have been if the butchers hadn't gotten to it while you were still a wee babe and unable to ram their scalpel in their eye," Cruz, who wrote an article for *Natural Health* this January, confesses. "A restored foreskin is never going to be the same as a natural one. It's sort of a fauxskin."

Yet many of the websites for circumcised men--and those who love them--advocate undergoing foreskin restoration. After finishing his two-year process, Cruz stayed on the Restore website to provide emotional and technical support for other men on similar journeys.

He says that his main motivation was restoring physical sensitivity, but each man has his own reasons for the process.

Whether it's due to spiritual or physical reasons, the Foreskin Restoration Ring and NOCIRC websites have a rapidly growing set of web links. And the National Organization of Restoring Men, originally known as RECover A Penis (RECAP), reports an international list of members spanning six continents.

Fatherly Cruz cautions that each man needs to have realistic expectations about his penis' healing capacities. For example, the 20,000 nerve endings located in the foreskin that are severed in a routine medical circumcision are forever lost. He adds that it is impossible to recover the estimated 240 feet of microscopic nerves, sensory components known as Meissner's corpuscles, the sexually responsive ring known as the frenar band, and the sensitive V-shaped frenulum lost at the hands of "willy wackers."

But Cruz believes that foreskin recovery is one step guys can take in the battle for an intact penis. On a physical level, he says, it helps reverse the effects of keratinization--the post-prepuce dulling of nerve endings due to a build up of layers of cells that occurs on an unprotected penis.

"I'm now a re-uncircumcised male. It's been a rather time-consuming effort, but both me and my girlfriend are glad I made the trip," Cruz reports. "It's never too late to have a happier dick!"

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