



NATIONAL Advisory Board on Health Care Ethics June 15th, 1999
(ETENE)
Ritva Halila

STATEMENT ON CIRCUMCISION OF BOYS

In Finnish health care, the circumcision of boys concerns a rather small group, which is however increasing. In practice circumcision is in Finland related exclusively to observing religious traditions in Judaism and Islam. Jewish boys are circumcised at the age of eight days and Islamic boys most often at the age of about seven years. A major part of the circumcisions are made in the private sector, in particular in the Greater Helsinki area. Elsewhere, in localities with no private health care, circumcisions have also been performed within public health care.

The most crucial ethical issues linked to circumcision of boys are as follows:

1. How to see to it that circumcision does not entail the child a traumatising experience of pain or an emotional problem that remains oppressive?
2. How to interpret the principle of consent, when the operation is performed on minors, even on new-born boys?
3. Can this operation be performed if there are no therapeutic grounds for it?
4. Is the operation linked with such treatment risks that are not ethically acceptable?
5. Is the operation performed in medical terms professionally and safely, or is any quackery involved?
6. Are those to be circumcised in an equal position as regards, for instance, the safety of treatment and financial considerations?
7. Are such care resources used for these operations that it would be more justifiable to use for care that is in medical terms more necessary?

Ethical considerations linked to circumcision of boys were dealt with at the meetings of the National Advisory Board on Health Care Ethics on 5 February, 10 March and 2 June 1999. The issue was debated and statements asked from the Jewish and Islamic Communities in Finland. The issue was also discussed with Islamic persons. The General Secretary of the Advisory Board has also been in contact with the other Nordic countries, of which Norway and Sweden have recently dealt with circumcision issues.

As far as the other Nordic countries are concerned, in Sweden circumcisions are made both at public hospitals and at private hospitals and out-patient departments. There has been discussion about the justification of circumcisions and the need for additional legislation in Sweden, too. The National Council on Medical Ethics, that corresponds to the Finnish National Advisory Board on Health Care Ethics, has not proposed amendments to the prevalent practice or legislation. In Norway the Ministry of Health has issued a directive according to which the circumcisions of boys should be performed at public hospitals. Physicians may, pleading their conscience, refuse to perform the operation. Denmark has no law or general regulations on this issue. In Copenhagen circumcisions for religious reasons are carried out at university hospitals and the costs are covered by

society. Circumcisions are also made privately. In Iceland circumcisions for religious reasons are made in the private sector.

Circumcision of boys is an old rite linked to very strong religious traditions, whose role in Judaism and Islam is very central. It has been detected on the basis of extensive research materials that circumcision of boys is to some extent beneficial to health, but compared to the costs of the operations this health effect is however marginal. In the opinion of the National Advisory Board, circumcisions carried out for reasons other than medical can be in Finland ethically acceptable only when performed on members of the two above-mentioned religious communities. When taking account of, on the one hand, the freedom of religion and, on the other hand, the minor amount and harmless nature of these operations, a clear majority of the Advisory Board is of the opinion that it is not ethically justified to refuse to accept those circumcisions of boys that are performed on religious grounds among Jews and Muslims. From the point of view of ethics it is important to avoid intolerance and disparagement of religious traditions. It is however equally important to do everything in our power to avoid traumatising physical and psychological experiences of pain. A child is a separate subject with his own human dignity and in need of protection.

There are various views among the Advisory Board as to whether the operations concerned should be carried out in the public health care sector and how the principle of consent should be understood in this context. Some of its members consider that in this case the child's consent is not needed, since it is question of a minor operation the refusal of which would put the child and his family in a difficult situation in their community. On the other hand, according to the general principles of giving consent, the operation should not be performed on a child objecting to it. Other members of the Advisory Board consider that the informed consent of the person concerned is the condition for performing the operation, although it would involve a break in the old religious tradition of circumcising male infants.

Furthermore, some members of the Advisory Board think that, for reasons of economic equality and safety, it should be made possible to perform circumcisions within public health care on the basis of specific agreements. Others, in turn, are of the opinion that this would not be justifiable allocation of resources.

The opinion of a clear majority of the members of the Advisory Board is that circumcision of boys in accordance with the principles presented above should not be prevented, but the issue should be managed confidentially and in a spirit of respect by means of clear agreements. At the local level the objective should be appropriate arrangements in accordance with the grading principles of the hospital districts. At the same time the Advisory Board states that this issue is of such a nature that physicians shall not be obliged to perform circumcisions against their conviction and conscience.

For reasons of clarity the Advisory Board underlines unanimously that ritual circumcision of girls is not ethical in any circumstances. It is question of mutilation punishable as an assault offence, and neither is there any long religious tradition obligating to it, similar to that concerning male circumcision.

For the Advisory Board

Martti Lindqvist
Chairman

Ritva Halila
General Secretary