



Male circumcision is the world's oldest surgery. To say this invokes a similar phrase, regarding the world's oldest profession. Both circumcision and prostitution involve doing something with intimate parts of the body in ways that many people find problematic, and for which the argumentative evidence can be quite peculiar.

In 1965, the psychoanalyst Masud Khan published a paper entitled, '[Foreskin Fetishism and its Relation to Ego Pathology in a Male Homosexual](#)' (Why don't scientific articles have titles like this anymore?) Khan describes a circumcised patient for whom the foreskinned penis represented 'the ideal bisexual organ composed of the glans penis and foreskin-vagina united in inseparable (non-castrative) oneness'. He concludes that the patient's exclusive focus on foreskinned youths in his sexual fantasies defended against a fear of 'total surrender and collapse' in relation to early experiences with the mother.

Anti-circumcision activists, or '[intactivists](#)', have become increasingly prominent in recent years. They believe the routine circumcision of boys – whether for religious, cultural, or purportedly medical reasons – is a mutilatory violation of bodily autonomy. The name of the movement readily invites psychoanalytic criticism, as it references that wish for 'intactness' that the field considers a major defensive fantasy against the subject's foundational fracture,

helplessness, or 'castration' – the wish to restore a prelapsarian unity and wholeness that never in fact existed. 'Throughout life I have regretted my circumcision,' writes an intactivist. 'Daily I wish I were whole.'

Some date the beginnings of the movement to a 1965 article published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* entitled 'The Rape of the Phallus!' The author contends, 'Perhaps not least of the reasons why American mothers seem to endorse the operation with such enthusiasm is the fact that it is one way an intensely matriarchal society can permanently influence the physical characteristics of its males.'



Daniel Ayat (2020)

From this perspective, intactivism appears to prefigure misogynistic internet subcultures such as 'men's rights activists' and 'incels,' both of which have flourished in our contemporary 'post-truth' era, where misinformation and lies appear impervious to correction through the presentation of contrary evidence.

A century earlier, medical advocates for routine male circumcision made equally energetic arguments in favour of the practice. Here is the surgeon Charles Remondino in his 1891 book [History of Circumcision](#):

The prepuce seems to exercise a malign influence in the most distant and apparently unconnected manner; where, like some of the evil genii or sprites in the Arabian tales, it can reach from afar the object of its malignity [...] affect him with all kinds of physical distortions and ailments, nocturnal pollutions, and other conditions calculated to weaken him physically, mentally, and morally; to land him, perchance, in jail or even in a lunatic asylum.

Remondino's views are echoed by the unfortunately named [R.W. Cockshut](#), who writes in support of routine male circumcision in a 1935 edition of the *British Medical Journal*: 'It does not seem apt to argue that "God knows best how to make little boys."' John Harvey Kellogg, the inventor of corn flakes, promoted both the cereal and circumcision for what he thought to be their salutary libido-diminishing effects.

Circumcision, it appears, is a powerful receptacle for fantasy. Whether presenting evidence from medical, psychological, or identitarian discourses, seemingly opposed wishes for the presence or the absence of the foreskin express similar anxieties about the phallus and its fragility which exceed the realm of 'hard facts.' This makes moral judgement on the procedure particularly complex, and perhaps may unsettle many other judgements we make, especially around the body and what we do with it.

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