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Press Release

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Activists Call on the United Nations to Classify Male Circumcision as a Human Rights Crime

Intactivist groups say African Circumcision-HIV studies show how little men's rights are valued.

SAN DIEGO, California – In response to results of a male circumcision HIV study presented yesterday at the Third International AIDS Society Conference on HIV Pathogenesis and Treatment in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, several intactivist groups called on the United Nations to classify circumcision of male children as a human rights crime. The study, performed on more than 3,000 African men, concluded that circumcision reduced the chance of HIV infection by 65% over an 18 month period.

Matthew Hess of San Diego based MGMBill.org said that ongoing circumcision studies in Africa are helping to perpetuate male genital mutilation. “Although the participants in this latest study were consenting adults, in the real world circumcision is forced upon helpless children. I find it quite ironic that the United Nations condemns female circumcision as a human rights crime while it simultaneously encourages male circumcision as a preventive health measure. Circumcision of children is genital mutilation, regardless of gender, and the U.N. needs to take action now to ensure that male circumcision is performed only on fully informed consenting adults.”

Tina Kimmel, MSW, MPH, at the University of California Berkeley School of Social Welfare, said that the U.N. has a blind spot when it comes to male circumcision. “If this study had examined the health effects of preventive mastectomy or female circumcision, one can only imagine the uproar it would have caused. Sadly, there is a double standard when it comes to boys. The reality in Africa and the rest of the world is that male circumcision is usually performed on children who are unable to give their full consent, and the response from UNAIDS (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS) calling the results of this newest study ‘promising’ shows how the power of tradition can blind otherwise intelligent and rational people to the most horrific of crimes.” Kimmel is Coordinator of the Bay Area Intactivists Group (BANG), in Oakland, California, a group that hosts frequent public demonstrations and informational events on the consequences of male circumcision.

Dr. George Denniston, M.D., and President of Doctors Opposing Circumcision in Seattle, Washington, said that studies on male circumcision fail to take into account the sexual damage that circumcision leaves behind. “As with female circumcision, male circumcision removes erogenous tissue and leaves the genitals with significantly diminished sexual capacity. In addition to removing irreplaceable nerve endings, circumcision initiates a buildup of callus over the soft and moist exposed membrane of the glans and remaining inner foreskin. The result is an even further decline in sexual sensitivity that gets progressively worse as men age. The best way to prevent HIV transmission is by using condoms, not by cutting off part of the genitals.”

Marilyn Milos, R.N., and Director of the National Organization of Circumcision Information Resource Centers (NOCIRC) in San Anselmo, California, said the U.N. should take action. “The United Nations has a responsibility to uphold and implement the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child,” said Milos, “which calls on states to ‘take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children’. This terminology is fully applicable to male circumcision.” NOCIRC holds Roster status on the United Nations Economic and Social Council and has been working to change U.N. male circumcision policy since 1999. Although the United Nations currently recognizes forced and coerced cutting of females as a violation of human rights, it does not offer the same recognition to male victims.

In light of the mounting negative medical evidence surrounding circumcision, efforts to ban male circumcision of children the same way that female circumcision is banned are starting to gain momentum, especially in the United States. A bill proposed by MGMBill.org to ban medically unnecessary circumcision of children was resubmitted to Congress and the California Legislature earlier this year. One U.S. lawmaker, Rep. Virgil Goode (R-VA), has already indicated support for the bill in a letter posted on the group’s website. MGMBill.org is now in the process of gathering endorsements from health and human rights organizations to prepare the bill for sponsorship.