

Circumcision of boys

Thousands of children are circumcised in Germany for no reason

By Marian Schäfer | 24.February.2022, 10:49am



Medically justified? The picture shows a circumcision on a two-year-old in a private clinic in Berlin. PHOTO: dpa / Kay Nietfeld

The foreskin is still removed from thousands of boys every year - in most cases, circumcision is performed without a medical reason.

The consequences for mental and physical health can be fatal.

28,810. That's how many circumcisions doctors performed in 2020 on boys up to 15 years of age who had their foreskin cut off on an outpatient basis. In addition, another 3,412 boys up to 15 years of age were treated in hospital. Most circumcisions took place up to elementary school age. This is based on data from the Kassenärztliche Bundesvereinigung (National Hospital Billing System). So, in summary, slightly more than 32,000 boys and adolescents were circumcised as outpatients or inpatients in 2020.

Circumcisions are only very rarely medically indicated

Doctors take a critical view of the figures: "Only very few of the of the interventions performed in 2020 can be considered medically justified," says pediatrician Christoph Kupferschmid, who for years has been making recommendations for the Professional Association of Pediatric and Adolescent Physicians as to when boys should be circumcised and when they should not. What the pediatrician is talking about: interventions that are billed to health insurance companies must be medically necessary.

According to a current medical guideline, this is the case when a pathological foreskin constriction is involved. A so-called "primary phimosis", however, occurs in only 0.6 to 1.5 percent of boys. In addition, there are cases with "secondary phimosis," which is mainly caused by the skin disease "lichen sclerosus." This rare autoimmune disease affects between 0.3 and 0.6 percent of boys. "With an assumed 360,000 boys born each year, one would expect about 7,000 medically indicated circumcisions - and that would be generously calculated," Kupferschmid said.

Circumcision: thousand-fold billing fraud?

So what's behind the numbers? Anyone who deals with this question enters a minefield. That's because behind some of the circumcisions that are paid for by health insurers are presumed to be religiously motivated

interventions and thus thousands of cases of billing fraud. "To me, many of the phimosis diagnoses are bogus diagnoses," Kupferschmid says. "But anyone who accuses a physician of that is at risk of being sued."

In fact, the situation is paradoxical: in 2012, the Regional Court of Cologne considered circumcisions that were not medically necessary to be bodily harm. The background to the case was a religiously motivated circumcision that led to complications. The boy, who was four years old at the time, came to a clinic because of bleeding. The doctors there called in the public prosecutor's office.

Ten years since the Cologne verdict: circumcision is bodily harm

Mainly at the urging of the Muslim and Jewish communities, the German government at that time expanded the German Civil Code to include the paragraph on "circumcision of the male child." Since almost exactly ten years ago, parents have officially had the right to have this procedure performed on their children, even if it is not medically justified.

According to the law, it does not even need a doctor, although the circumcision is to be performed according to "the rules of medical science." This is a contradiction, because "medical science" requires, for example, that a general anesthetic be administered. And only a doctor can administer anesthesia.

This leaves parents with only two options: Either they have the procedure done on their own dime, or they find doctors who make a diagnosis and thus behave unlawfully. This of course applies to religiously motivated circumcisions as well as those motivated by other reasons.

Better protected without foreskin?

Official statistics do not reveal anything about this. However, experts like Christoph Kupferschmid estimate that a good 70 percent of people of Muslim background are circumcised in this country, because even among Muslims, there are boys who are not circumcised. Some circumcisions do not take place in Germany. Since Muslims make up seven percent of the population, of the 32,000 cases of circumcised boys in Germany in 2020, they account for a good 14,000 of the remaining procedures. Jewish children are also circumcised, but their number is hardly significant in comparison.

Accordingly, there would remain a large number of interventions that are not religiously motivated, but are done because parents (or their doctors) consider it to be hygienic and as a protection against infectious diseases or even cancer. In fact, the presence of a healthy foreskin seems to reduce the risk of penile cancer. Or the issue of AIDS, which is often cited by proponents: In fact, the mucous membrane of the foreskin contains cells that can be infected by the HIV virus. However, circumcision only has an effect where the rate of infection is extremely high. For this reason, the World Health Organization recommends circumcision - but not in general, only for adults in certain African areas, and always with reference to condoms as the best preventive measure - far ahead of circumcision.

Circumcision: complication rate is high

For critics like Christoph Kupferschmid, circumcision without a medical indication is a fundamental problem: "We doctors are first and foremost to prevent harm to the patient," he says. To remove an intact foreskin for no reason would contradict this commandment. After all, circumcision can have a variety of side effects.

In fact, the list of possible physical consequences is already long. Even in a qualified surgical center, the complication rate is more than five percent. Problems are especially caused by bleeding, wound infections and penile deformities, if remaining layers of skin are incorrectly sutured together. In ten percent of cases (in newborns, this figure is as high as 20 percent), there is also a narrowing of the external urethral opening. Pain during urination and frequent infections can be a consequence of this.

Circumcised men: laborious sex

But circumcision can also have a psychosocial impact on boys and men. Simply because they are missing the foreskin, one of the most erogenous zones of the body: "Circumcised men - and also their female partners - report in epidemiological studies that sexual intercourse becomes more and more difficult, that sexual intercourse is more laborious and that it is more difficult to achieve sexual satisfaction," says psychoanalyst Matthias Franz from the University Hospital in Düsseldorf, Germany. "This can also have an impact on couple intimacy and therefore on attachment and relationship behavior and could partly explain the tendency, described in some studies, of circumcised men to change partners more frequently."

Matthias Franz, like Kupferschmid, is one of the critics of circumcision that is not medically indicated: "From a medical point of view, there is no reason to cut off a healthy boy's healthy foreskin," he says. It is particularly critical when this happens at the age of four or five. "In this phase, boys turn to their genitals more intensively, they discover gender differences, and their psychosexual identity becomes consolidated." If the genitals are violated or injured during this period, this development can be severely disrupted. "In this context, child therapists describe childish behavioral problems such as enuresis, social withdrawal, fears or loss of confidence," Franz said.

New study shows: Trauma circumcision

The last time the psychoanalyst investigated how traumatizing the intervention can be was in an experimental study, the results of which have not yet been published. In the study, which involved a group of 64 men circumcised in childhood and 79 uncircumcised men, they were shown pictures in which one contained pictures of landscapes, in another pictures of animals, and in another pictures of violence from three categories: victims of criminal violence, surgery (such as on the open body) and circumcision scenes.

The scientists measured, for example, the heart rate and the anxiety sweat. "We were able to determine that in childhood, circumcised men showed similar reaction patterns to the circumcision scenes as traumatized people," explains Matthias Franz. If one were to ask whether they had a problem with circumcision, they might deny it. "But unconsciously," says Franz, "they react with strong stress when they are reminded of the pain and anxiety of their circumcision."