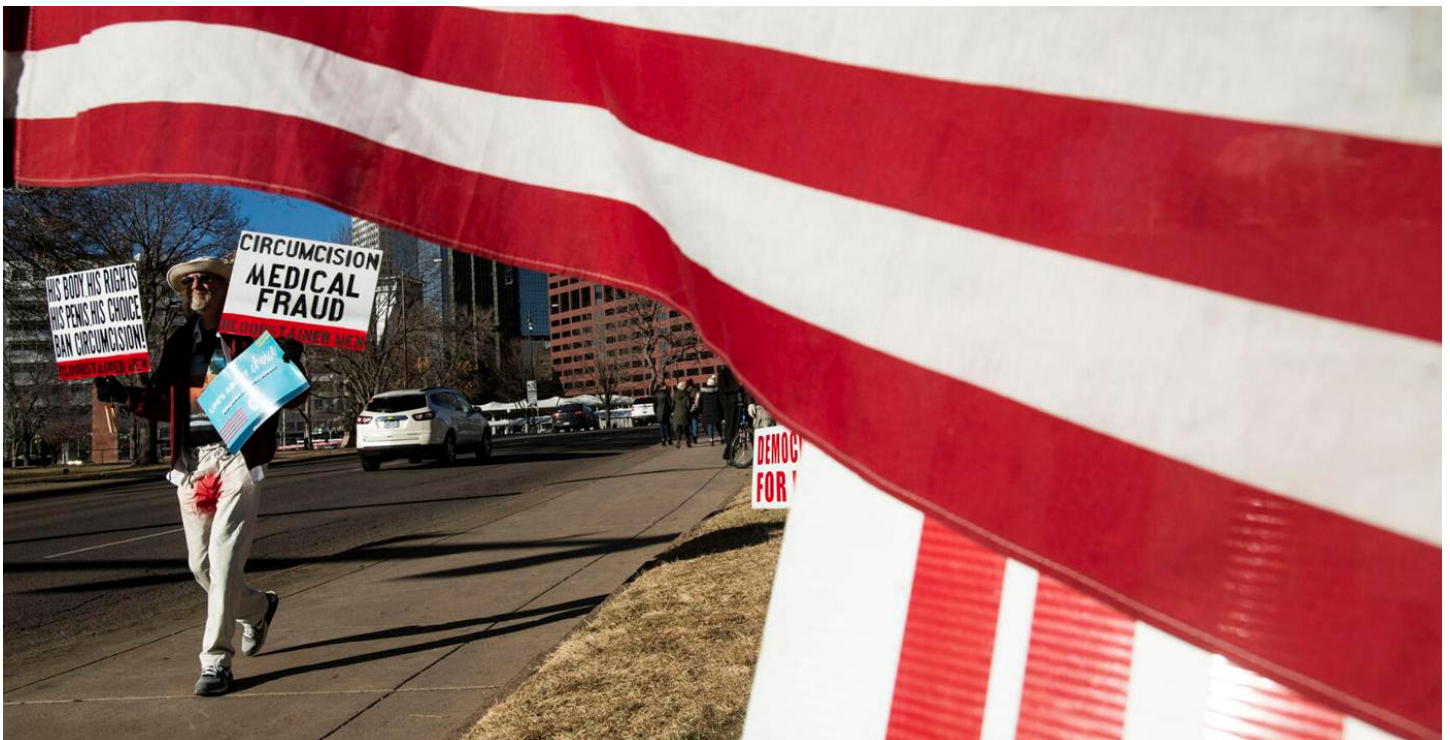


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Bloodstained Men and other groups' push to not circumcise infant boys seen as anti-Semitic by some, a child-protection issue by others



Daniel Bryce, from Thornton, shows his support for the Celebrate Life Rally and March and to protest circumcision at the Colorado State Capitol building in Denver, Colo., on Saturday, Jan. 15, 2022. Bryce is part of a group called the Bloodstained Men, whose mission is to “warn the American people that circumcision is cruel, worthless and destructive.” When out protesting circumcision, members of the group wear “The Bloodstained Suite,” consisting of red paint on the crotch to symbolize a red bloodstain American doctors inflicted on the genitals of male infants. (Chancey Bush/The Gazette)

A decade after men began showing up at public events wearing white pants smeared with red paint on the crotch, the shock value hasn’t faded.

People seem simultaneously repulsed and intrigued.

“What’s this about?” onlookers wonder.

Meet the [Bloodstained Men](#), a nationwide organization formed in 2012, whose supporters object to infant circumcision and want the longstanding tradition to stop.

Shock value is what they’re going for, says member Daniel Bryce, a retired mechanical engineer who lives in Thornton.

Bryce says he's suffered numerous physical and mental problems that he attributes to having skin at the top of his penis surgically removed decades ago as an infant.

"When you're not heard or listened to, then you do shocking things to be heard, to get attention," he said. "When people say, 'I've never heard a man complain before, my response is, 'Well, maybe you're not listening.'"

Bryce and other Bloodstained Men consider circumcision to be genital mutilation. But unlike surgical alterations to female genitalia, supporters say males don't get the same attention or the respect for their view that the operation infringes on human rights.

"This is amputation, a violation, an atrocity," Bryce said. "Babies are being harmed and traumatized, and it needs to be recognized for what it is."

Bloodstained Men is part of a larger national movement to educate parents, change state laws or eradicate the procedure entirely.

"We all agree this is an ethically problematic act and you shouldn't be making permanent body modifications to infants who don't have the ability to consent," said Eliyahu Ungar-Sargon, a founding board member of [Bruchim](#), meaning "blessed," but part of a Hebrew phrase translating to "welcome." The group formed last year to advocate for Jewish families of uncircumcised boys to be welcome in synagogues.

Social media has helped increase interest in public criticism of circumcision, said Anthony Losquadro, founder and director of [Intaction Inc.](#), a lobbying group based in Brooklyn, N.Y.

"Parents are questioning why we are cutting off parts of baby boys that are normal," he said.

An ancient custom

Infant circumcision is an ancient custom for Jews and Muslims, who continue to broadly support the practice.

The surgery became commonplace in the United States at the end of the 19th century and adopted as a social norm for cosmetic reasons and perceived medical benefits primarily relating to hygiene and preventing sexually transmitted diseases.

But it remains a divisive issue.

The American Academy of Pediatrics studied evidence on the topic in 2012 and concluded the health benefits of newborn male circumcision are not great enough to recommend routine circumcision but that because of the possible benefits, parents should have the option to circumcise their sons if they choose to.

In its revised policy, the professional association of pediatricians also stated elective circumcision should be conducted only if the infant's physical condition is stable and healthy.

In 2018, the American Association of Urology determined that when circumcision "is being discussed with parents and informed consent obtained, medical benefits and risks, and ethical, cultural and individual preferences should be considered."

Being uncircumcised sometimes can lead to problems in adulthood, which Colorado Springs urologist [Dr. Benjamin Coons](#) works to correct. Various types of infections, inflammatory disorders, penile cancer and sexually transmitted diseases are known to affect uncircumcised men more than those who are circumcised, he said.

“The benefits are small, but you eliminate some of the rare complications that can happen from not being circumcised,” he said, “and you have to weigh that with the risks of circumcision.”

Risks include pain, bleeding, infection, removal of too little or too much foreskin, or in “extremely rare” circumstances, death, according to an abstract in *The Scientific World Journal*. Some studies link sudden infant death syndrome and psychological effects as males age.

Outside of religious significance, Coons said the decision is a personal choice, and the problems uncircumcised men might develop are “very rare,” which is why the American Academy of Pediatrics doesn’t strongly advocate for the benefits.

Pushing for informed consent

The national rate of circumcision for male children is declining. A 2015 survey from YouGov showed 55% of male American babies were being circumcised at the time, compared with 1960s estimates of 83%.

Of the 62% of adult male respondents who said they were circumcised, 86% said they were happy with the condition. Ten percent said they wished they had not been circumcised.

Circumcision is defined as “one of the oldest and most common surgical procedures performed globally,” in several publications, including a 2010 international review by the World Health Organization and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS.

The report estimated that one in three males worldwide were circumcised.

Objectors argue it's all about the money.

“The doctors sell it, they push it,” Bryce said. “Parents are told about the benefits and pressured.”

The issue normally is not a public discussion, said Losquadro of Intaction, but rather one that’s held between the parents and hospital staff or a pediatrician.

“Many parents are against it but aren’t sure what they can do about it, which generates a certain amount of apathy,” Losquadro said.

“Organizations like ours are trying to show people there is a way we can raise awareness and try to keep baby boys from having a normal healthy body part cut off without their consent.”

Intaction is pushing for informed consent legislation in New York and California that Losquadro says would help parents in their decision-making.

Proposed bills, for example, would require medical facilities and providers to notify parents before they give informed consent that infant circumcision is medically unnecessary and cosmetic.

The group also has North Carolina and Colorado on its radar for legislative reformation, according to Losquadro.

A part of Jewish law

Circumcisions in the United States largely are performed for non-religious reasons, but ritual circumcision dates to the biblical Book of Genesis, in which God instructs Abraham to circumcise himself and his sons, Jacob and Esau, to cement a covenant between human beings and Creator.

The practice is part of Jewish law, and promoting its demise is “purely anti-Semitic,” said Rabbi Jay Sherwood, who leads Colorado Springs’ largest synagogue, [Temple Shalom](#).

Ungar-Sargon of the group Bruchim said while most people involved in the anti-circumcision movement are not anti-Semites, some have been, which he said has gone largely unchecked by organizations’ leaders.

“It’s something that causes me a lot of pain,” he said, adding that Bruchim, formed in October, is attracting Jews who felt they couldn’t continue their activism in the broader movement and are seeking a “safe space, where we don’t tolerate anti-Semitism.”

Opposition is as old as the custom, Sherwood said.

“There have been people trying to ban ritual circumcision for Jews and Muslims for thousands of years,” he said.

Egyptians were the earliest people practicing circumcision in 5th century B.C.E., according to historical accounts, and protests were documented in the Hellenistic period beginning in 323 B.C.E.

Contemporary efforts to stop circumcision have failed, Sherwood said. German lawmakers reversed a 2012 court ruling to ban circumcision, instead voting to keep it legal.

“Trying to make religious practices illegal is an infringement on people’s religion — and that’s not acceptable,” Sherwood said.

Jewish boys traditionally are circumcised on their eighth day of life by a mohel, who can be a rabbi, pediatrician or urologist. Sherwood said the religious ceremony, called a bris, is very different from an experience in a hospital or doctor’s office.

The bris denotes a mark of the spiritual covenant with God, he said, and is usually held in a relative’s home.

Family members watch as the baby is carried to the moyel on a soft pillow and either held or placed on a table. The baby boy enters into the covenant surrounded by prayers from those in attendance, Sherwood said.

The circumcision itself takes one or two minutes, with the baby sucking on a piece of cloth that’s been dipped in wine, he said.

In his religious work of more than four decades, Sherwood said he’s never heard any complaints about a bris.

“I think these groups trying to ban circumcision in the United States are very fringe groups,” he said. “To the people who are protesting, I would tell them if you don’t want your children to be circumcised, don’t circumcise your children. But don’t try to outlaw other people’s religious practices.”

Said Ungar-Sargon of Bruchim, “Circumcision doesn’t confer Jewish status on anyone; if a boy is born to Jewish parents and has never been circumcised, that boy is still Jewish.”

Muslims are the largest religious group to carry out male circumcision, which is strongly encouraged for boys as part of the Abrahamic faith, as a confirmation of their relationship with God.

Khitan is the Arabic word for circumcision, also referred to as tahera, meaning “cleansed” or “purified.”

“It is a ritual aimed at improving cleanliness, and we are encouraged to do it for boys right after birth,” said Kamel Elwazeir, president of the [Islamic Society of Colorado Springs](#).

There is no direct mention of circumcision in the Quran, the central religious text of Islam, and compliance is not enforced, Elwazeir said.

“We follow it because we follow the teachings of the prophet Muhammed,” he said. “It is a very private matter — even in the Muslim tradition, people don’t ask one another.”

Bryce leaves on a protest tour of southwestern states later this month with other members of Bloodstained Men. He'll wear his “Intact Genitals Are a Human Right” T-shirt and his splattered pants, simulating the wound to the genitals from infancy, when he couldn't defend himself.

“We blame ourselves and suffer shame,” Bryce said. “Our abusers know we'll remain silent and keep our scars, our wounds, in our pants.

“I refuse to remain silent.”

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Daniel Bryce poses for a portrait with his fresh tattoo that reads “MGM Survivor,” (male genital mutilation) in addition to “Survivor of Circumcision” on his right arm at the Alchemy Art Collective in Brighton this month. Bryce is a member of a group called the Bloodstained Men, who consider circumcision to be genital mutilation and whose mission is to “warn the American people that circumcision is cruel, worthless and destructive.”

Photos by Chancey Bush, The Gazette