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Press Release

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HIV Prevention a Poor Excuse for Circumcision, Activists Say

SAN DIEGO, California – In response to recent studies linking male circumcision to lower HIV infection rates, health and human rights activists are warning that circumcision should not be used as a tool to combat the spread of HIV. Circumcision is the removal of the foreskin, a protective and highly erogenous zone of tissue that covers the penis.

“Preventive circumcision makes even less sense than preventive mastectomy,” said Matthew Hess, President of San Diego based MGMBill.org. “Preventive breast removal would actually prevent many cancers, while virtually all those exposed repeatedly to HIV will still contract the virus, circumcised or not. And despite the findings of a new study in Kenya, circumcision clearly has not been effective in controlling the spread of HIV in the United States.”

MGMBill.org is a group pushing to add gender neutral language to a U.S. law that bans circumcision of girls under the age of 18. The study referenced by Hess appeared in the February 15, 2005, issue of *The Journal of Infectious Diseases*. It concluded that circumcised truck drivers in Kenya had a 0.5% chance of contracting HIV from an infected female partner, versus a 1.3% chance for intact men.

Hess also criticized a recent \$5.4 million grant by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to study the effects of male circumcision on HIV rates in Uganda. “The Gates Foundation has done a lot of good things for Africa over the years,” said Hess. “But this ill-conceived grant is helping to promote genital mutilation of males on a continent that is receiving aid from other agencies to eliminate female genital mutilation. I think it’s very counterproductive.”

George Denniston, M.D., a retired professor at the University of Washington School of Medicine, said the HIV-circumcision link is weak at best. “The United States is one of the only developed nations that still routinely practices male circumcision, and yet the U.S. also has the highest rate of HIV infection among all developed countries. To suggest that circumcision should somehow be used as a tool to control HIV is highly irresponsible medicine, but that is what some of these studies seem to be doing.”

Denniston has authored several books on the harmful effects of circumcision. He is also President of Doctors Opposing Circumcision, an international group of physicians that advises against circumcision because of the damage it causes to sexual function. The group also argues that circumcision of children is a violation of professional medical ethics and basic human rights.

Brian O’Donnell, PA-C, MHS, of New Haven, Connecticut, said that research money would be better spent on ways to increase condom use, which is a proven way to prevent HIV. “Whether or not a man is circumcised, he has to wear a condom during sex to prevent the transmission of HIV from an infected partner. The most common reason men give for not wearing a condom is that it reduces sensation and pleasure. Removing the foreskin only reduces the sensation further.”

O’Donnell said he is planning to enter into a research project designed to look at how circumcision has affected condom use in the U.S. and may be contributing to the high rate of sexually transmitted infections and HIV. “This may be what’s happening in the U.S., where 70% of 18-24 year olds are circumcised and the rates of HIV are 5 times that of Europe, where less than 1% of the men are circumcised. It also could explain why the rates of STD’s and unintended pregnancies in the USA are up to 74 times higher than in Europe.”

O’Donnell added that he sees less condom use among his male patients who are circumcised, and that their rate of STD diagnosis is higher than in intact men. He also warned that a false sense of security is already starting to take hold in Africa, where some people now mistakenly believe they can’t contract HIV if they are circumcised.