

Australian Doctors Soften Anti-Circumcision Stance on HIV Risk

By Jason Gale

July 25 (Bloomberg) -- Australia health officials may want to encourage greater use of circumcision for infant boys as research shows the procedure can help prevent the spread of HIV, the country's top AIDS expert said.

Studies have shown the surgical procedure performed on adult men in Africa reduced their chances of getting HIV through heterosexual intercourse by as much as 60 percent, according to the World Health Organization. The finding is encouraging doctors in Australia to rethink their opposition to the practice, said David Cooper, director of the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research in Sydney.

"I think the stance will be softened and that pediatricians and obstetricians will explain to parents a more balanced view of the advantages and disadvantages" of circumcision, Cooper said in an interview at an AIDS conference in Sydney yesterday. Physicians are "looking at it with less distain than they did several years ago." After the Second World War, Australia conducted routine circumcision of all newborn boys, partly to avoid hygiene problems related to germs that can linger in unwashed foreskins. The millennia-old technique fell out of favor in the mid-1970s as doctors concluded that the risks of surgery outweighed the benefits. Data collected in 2004 showed fewer than one in eight Australian males are circumcised by six months of age.

"There is always going to be a controversy about whether to be cut or uncut," said Cooper, who is also a professor of medicine at the University of New South Wales.

"It's now pretty clear that it's a low risk procedure and does have a lot of benefits in addition to protecting against HIV." Studies published in The Lancet last February helped doctors understand the link between circumcision and HIV prevention, "a breakthrough" in the fight against AIDS, Anthony Fauci, the director of the U.S. National Institute on Allergy and Infectious Diseases told reporters at the Sydney conference.

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