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Health benefits of male circumcision

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Press Release: Massey University Health benefits of male circumcision should be recognised by public health system

Massey's Director Pasifika wants the Government to consider making circumcision available through the public health system in light of studies suggesting the procedure has health benefits for men and women as well as being considered important to Pacific people.

Professor Sitaleki Finau says studies show male circumcision helps prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, including Aids, and there is a proven link between circumcised men and a decrease in cervical cancer caused by the human papilloma virus.

He says New Zealand health authorities should take note of World Health Organisation backing for United States trials in Uganda, Kenya and South Africa confirming male circumcision can cut heterosexual HIV transmission by up to 60 per cent.

In a paper titled Circumcision of Pacific Boys: Tradition at the Cutting Edge, presented at a recent Public Health Association Conference in Auckland, Professor Finau provided insights into why most Pacific boys in New Zealand and in the islands continue to be circumcised.

This is despite a dramatic swerve away from the procedure that was almost standard for all army recruits and newborn boys born in New Zealand in the 1940s.

About 95 per cent of newborn boys were circumcised in that decade, but the numbers started to decline about 1950 to the point where circumcision rates in public hospitals last decade were about 0.35 per cent of total male births.

Currently, circumcision on social or religious grounds is unavailable in the New Zealand public health system and although virtually all of the 100,000 Samoan and Tongan males living in New Zealand are circumcised, the procedure must be paid for at private surgeries and health clinics.

Professor Finau thinks the Ministry of Health should review its policy - despite the climate of heightened emotion about human rights and the non-therapeutic removal of foreskin described by some men's groups as genital mutilation.

Evidence that circumcision lowers a boy's chance of suffering urinary tract infections,

eliminates the risk of infections under the foreskin, decreases the risk of developing cancer of the penis (although a very rare condition) and reduces the risk for men of contracting sexually transmitted diseases are grounds for making male circumcision, he says.

"It's in the national interest to circumcise men to protect men and women, and save on cervical cancer management. Women would be getting a good deal if more men were circumcised."

Professor Finau says male circumcision among Pacificans is "a solemn ritual" and an important male rite of passage carried out between the ages of seven and 15 years. "Being circumcised is sign of manliness and sexual prowess. Not to be circumcised can bring shame on a man and his partner and family."

He says there is evidence male circumcision was being done in the Pacific before the arrival of Europeans. The use of bone, bamboo and shell tools has been replaced by modern medical methods available in designated clinics such as the Langimalie Clinic, run by the Tongan Health Society in Onehunga, Auckland.

Before joining Massey last year, Professor Finau was Professor of Public Health at the Fiji School of Medicine in Suva and has previously held academic appointments at the Universities of Otago and Auckland.

He has a medical degree from the University of Queensland as well as Fellowships from the Australasian College of Tropical Medicine, and the Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine.

Remuera gynaecologist John Thomson is also in favour of circumcision becoming available through the public health system as an effective method of preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

Dr Thomson has performed more than 6000 circumcisions in his private clinic in the past 30 years using a non-surgical device attached to the penis that causes the foreskin to come off in a few days.

The procedure costs from \$170 for very small babies and more for older infants. He recommends babies be circumcised by six weeks of age. Most of the circumcisions he carries out are on Muslim boys.