

THE VANCOUVER SUN

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TUESDAY, AUGUST 28, 2012 | FINAL EDITION

Routine circumcision for boys advisable: U.S. study

New guidelines suggest procedure can reduce risk of infection, cancer;
Canadian doctors to follow with own clarification

BY MIKE HAGER, VANCOUVER SUN



The Canadian Paediatric Society says it will soon clarify its own position on whether Canadian boys are better off circumcised, after its American counterpart came out in favour of the procedure Monday.

The American Academy of Pediatrics' new guidelines - based on a review of more than 1,000 scientific articles and published in the journal *Pediatrics* - fall short of universally recommending the procedure for all infants, recommending that parents should make the final call.

The change was prompted by scientific evidence that suggests **circumcision can reduce the risk of urinary tract infections in infants and cut the risk of penile cancer and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and the human papilloma-virus or HPV, which causes cervical and other cancers.**

The Canadian society, which does not recommend routine circumcision for newborns, is reviewing the medical literature on the controversial subject and will publish a study "written by Canadians for Canadians to help parents make that decision" within the next year.

"At the end of the day, will we make the decision easier for parents? Probably not, but what we hope to do is make sure it's a better-informed decision," said CPS president Dr. Richard Stanwick. "It might influence those people that are basically uncertain as to what to do."

The CPS policy, which was last updated in November 2004 and helps provincial health ministries to determine what to cover under their insurance, now says "the overall evidence of the benefits and harms of circumcision is so evenly balanced that it does not support recommending circumcision as a routine procedure for newborns."

Because medical experts in Canada haven't ruled in its favour, British Columbia's Ministry of Health only pays for circumcisions when they are deemed medically necessary.

Infants who need a circumcision either have urinary tract infections or foreskins that are: tight (phimosis), retracted (paraphimosis) or inflamed (posthitis). Boys and men who need a circumcision usually will have one of those conditions or may require the procedure if they have a rash on the head of their penis (recurrent balanitis) or have HPV.

During the 2011-2012 fiscal year, 1,153 British Columbians had medically-necessary circumcisions, costing the province \$174,670, according to ministry spokeswoman Cindy MacDougall. The year before that 1,387 circumcisions were covered by the provincial government.

The costs for these circumcisions averages out to less than \$150 for each surgery. For those parents who elect to circumcise their infant son, it can cost more than double that.

Dr. Neil Pollock of Vancouver, who claims he has performed the procedure more than 30,000 times, charges \$445 for babies two months and younger. His clinic does about 2,500 of the surgeries a year, the majority of the circumcisions in the Lower Mainland, and Pollock said in an email that "we expect a sharp increase" after AAP's statement.

Circumcision is a ritual obligation for infant Jewish boys, and is also a common rite among Muslims, who account for the largest share of circumcised men worldwide. Some surgeries are still performed by non-physicians within B.C.'s Jewish community, but many families are now insisting on injectable freezing, which can only be given by a physician, Pollock said.

Although the AAP's 1999 statement was fairly neutral, **the new statement, published on Monday in the journal *Pediatrics* comes down in favour of the procedure, saying the health benefits of new-born male circumcision "justify access to this procedure for families who choose it."**

The task force said male circumcision does not appear to adversely affect penile sexual function, sensitivity of the penis or sexual satisfaction. But the group did say it is imperative that those performing circumcision are adequately trained, that they use sterile techniques and offer effective pain management.

Stanwick said parents should be given unbiased information about the procedure and be allowed to make the call on their own.

"We know that cultural, religious and, quite candidly, personal factors very much enter into the decision-making process to the point that if dad is circumcised, junior may be too. Or not, as the case may be."

With files from Reuters mhager@postmedia.com