

June 6, 2011

Dear Ms. Abby Porth, The Jewish Community Relations Council, and The Committee for Parental Choice and Religious Freedom,

I am writing to express my support for your efforts to fight the proposed ban on circumcision in San Francisco which will be on the ballot this fall. I am an emergency physician, and wanted to describe a brief anecdote from the world of emergency medicine that demonstrates the medical value of circumcision and preventable medical illness.

I practice in a community with a generally low prevalence of infant circumcision. Frequently, I see young boys with urinary tract infections, balanitis and balanoposthitis – infectious conditions seen much more frequently in uncircumcised boys. Two nights ago, I took care of a six year old boy who came in with a case of balanoposthitis, inflammation of the tip of his penis and foreskin which we typically treat simply with an antibiotic or antifungal cream.

However, his parents had pulled back his foreskin to try to clean underneath, and the foreskin had become stuck in a retracted position, a condition called paraphimosis. The foreskin and glans penis had become markedly swollen and they were unable to bring it back down – the child was in considerable pain, and this condition – if not emergently treated – can result in compromise of blood flow to the penis and necrosis or loss/death of that tissue.

In short, we were able to treat him aggressively with pain medication, sedation and compression techniques, that over a few hour period were successful in relieving the swelling and restoring his foreskin to a safe position. In this case, an emergent surgery was not required, though it sometimes is necessary in these situations. I do not argue that medically every boy needs a circumcision, but certainly this is one dramatic example of a completely preventable medical emergency that resulted in significant pain, emotional distress for patient and family and significant cost with hours of time in an emergency department as well as the risks of a procedural sedation – none of which would have been necessary had he been circumcised.

Again, I laud your efforts to oppose this unconstitutional ban on an accepted medical practice. The proposed bill is an affront to all who believe in religious freedom, and if implemented, would send a message to Jews, Muslims and others that San Francisco, a city long known for diversity and tolerance, no longer welcomes those with these long standing religious traditions. Medically, there is a great deal of research that supports a role for circumcision in preventing the infections mentioned above, as well as penile cancer, cervical cancer and the spread of HIV. The medical community as well as those who believe religious and cultural freedom of practice and expression should stand united to defeat this proposed ban on circumcision.

Sincerely,

Brian D. McBeth, M.D.  
Attending Physician  
San Francisco General Hospital  
Clinical Assistant Professor  
Department of Emergency Medicine  
University of California, San Francisco