Community perception of traditional circumcision in a sub-region of the Transkei, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

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Abstract

The ritual of traditional male circumcisions (initiation) of young adults goes back generations among Xhosa people of South Africa. Xhosa tribe is committed to preserving the old cultural traditions. Recently, this ritual has been tarnished by serious complications that have occurred, leading to amputation of penis and even death of initiates. To estimate the community perception of traditional circumcision, an interview of 100 subjects was carried out. About 67% were unaware of risks of traditional surgery and 16% unsure about any existed risk. Only 17% knew about risks associated with it. Sixty-three percent favoured traditional surgeons and 13% medical practitioners. No opinion was given by 24%. Traditional surgeons and the community must be aware of the risks associated with traditional circumcision.

Table I: Interviewed Subjects’ age-groups (n=100).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age groups</th>
<th>No. of subjects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 to 15 yrs.</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 to 20 yrs.</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>21 to 30 yrs.</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>31 to 45 yrs.</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>46 to 65 yrs.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
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and only 17% knew about the risks associated with the surgery (see Figure 1). Sixty-three percent of the subjects were in favour of traditional surgeons, 13% of medical practitioners, and 24% had no opinion (see Figure 2).

Discussion

Sixty-seven percent of the interviewed population was unaware of any risks associated with traditional circumcision. The Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (Contralesa) in the province is extremely unhappy about the manner in which the province is dealing with the issue. Local people are committed to upholding the old cultural traditions, among them the ritualistic circumcision of young adult males. Recently, this ritual has been tarnished by circumcision-associated morbidity and mortality.

The fact that 67% of the participants in this study were unaware of any risks associated with traditional circumcision indicates that the practice is deeply imbibed in the hearts and souls of the people and nobody thinks of it as a risk. Only 17% knew about the risks associated with traditional circumcision, and 16% were not sure about the complications. This high level of unfamiliarity with the complications indicates that the rural population needs education in order to make an informed choice between traditional or hospital surgery. In spite of the high mortality rate, the practice of traditional circumcision is still preferred by 63% of the interviewed individuals, and only 13% preferred to go to medical practitioners. Circumcision is not only a cultural and religious belief, but also advisable for hygienic reasons.

There may be minor complications after circumcision that cannot be avoided even when the procedure is undertaken by qualified surgeons. Besides the well-known surgical problems associated with traditional circumcision, there is also a poorly known complication, namely voluntary dehydration. Because of powerful social pressure, which imposes a feeling of guilt and failure if medical attention is sought, these patients often present late and may simply appear drowsy and withdrawn, without evidence of penile sepsis. However, just because the penis is all right does not mean that the patient is.

The traditional surgeons’ schools should provide training in order for male circumcisions to be performed in a standard, careful and safe manner. Initiates may be unwell even before commencing the ritual. Bleeding disorders, tuberculosis and HIV-related illnesses should be ruled out before admitting them to initiation school. The Eastern Cape Act on Circumcision stipulates that a doctor must see the initiates before the process starts and that the surgeons performing the function must have certificates for doing so, failing which they can be arrested. The police have arrested 30 traditional surgeons and traditional nurses in 2003, for operating without permission. The Act recommends fines of up to R10 000, or 10 years in jail. Five men were charged with murder and assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm in the magistrate’s court at Heidelberg, South Africa for deaths after botched circumcisions.

Conclusion

Circumcision is of significant cultural value to the Xhosa tribe, but it should be carried out safely. There is need for a well-planned prospective study to be carried out in this province to further explore circumcision-related knowledge and attitudes.

Acknowledgement

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References

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