

25 September 2015

The Hon. Jillian Skinner, MP
Minister for Health
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Dear Minister

Ending Involuntary and Unnecessary Medical Intervention on People who are Intersex

I write to request a comprehensive review of the practice of cosmetic and other “normalising” medical interventions on infants and children with intersex variations and for the introduction of reforms to require medical professionals to take a human rights approach to treating people who are intersex.

There is little public data on the prevalence of cosmetic genital surgery and related interventions on infants and children born with atypical sex characteristics, such as part or both male and female genitals, however the practice occurs in New South Wales usually shortly after birth with the consent of the child’s parents on the advice of doctors. The aim is to ‘normalise’ the child’s appearance according to male or female stereotypes, in order to minimise family concern, distress, stigma and gender identity confusion.

While the rationales for interventions are frequently psychological, I understand from parents’ reports that they receive limited information and advice from psychological professionals, and no referrals to intersex-led support groups.

Cosmetic genital surgery can cause lifelong physical and psychological suffering including pain, scarring, lost sexual sensation and appetite, and sterilisation; it can require ongoing treatment and medical assessment that is invasive and can be humiliating for a child. It is irreversible, and this is also problematic if the child’s later identity differs from a surgically-assigned sex of rearing.

Studies on the satisfaction of adults with cosmetic genital surgery performed on them as infants or children are rare however there is growing evidence of dissatisfaction and I refer you to the Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism article ‘Satisfaction with Genital Surgery and Sexual Life of Adults with XY Disorders of Sex Development: Results from the German Clinical Evaluation Study’ which found high rates of dissatisfaction with outcomes, particularly associated with sex life.

Given cosmetic surgery to ‘normalise’ genitals among infants and children is neither life-saving nor an urgent medical procedure, and that it can have lifelong negative impacts, there is community concern about its use on infants and children who have no say. The growing consensus is that any cosmetic procedures should be postponed until adulthood or adolescence when the person can make an informed decision.



Banning cosmetic genital surgery on infants and children is recommended by the Australian Human Rights Commission in its Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Intersex Rights report and by the World Health Organization in its interagency statement 'Eliminating forced, coercive and otherwise involuntary sterilization'. The Australian Senate Committee on Community Affairs 2013 Report on the Involuntary or Coerced Sterilisation of Intersex People in Australia called for guidelines that minimise surgical intervention and favour delaying 'normalising' treatment until a person can give informed consent. The Council of Europe this year recommended recognition of intersex persons' right not to undergo sex assignment treatment.

I agree that forcing unnecessary, irreversible surgical procedures that can have lifelong impacts on infants and children is a violation of their human rights and the practice must end.

Intersex and human rights advocacy groups have been arguing for reforms for many years and I share their concern that the government must address this human rights matter urgently to ensure infants born with intersex variations are no longer subject to unnecessary irreversible procedures that have lifelong impacts.

Could you please review the practice of cosmetic medical interventions on infants and children with intersex variations with the view to introducing reforms based on the principle of informed consent, and inform me of the action you will take?

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'AG', written in a cursive style.

Alex Greenwich
Member for Sydney