

# Foreskins for Keeps—An Idea Whose Time Has Come

by Gloria Lemay

## The end of circumcision by the first of January 2007 One woman's path to this project

© 2007 Midwifery Today, Inc. All rights reserved.

[Editor's note: This article first appeared in Midwifery Today Issue 81, Spring 2007.]  
Photo provided by the author

I was genitally mutilated when cut by a scalpel while giving birth at 17 years of age. It was called an episiotomy and it was "routine" for women 40 years ago. That painful surgery led me to the homebirths of my next two children because I knew that cutting genitals was wrong. Back then, women didn't have scientific studies or evidence, we simply knew it couldn't be right and we didn't have to prove it. Years later, a large randomized controlled study at BC Women's Hospital proved what I and thousands of other women always knew: Episiotomies do harm.(1)



### Circumcising boys

I have two intact brothers and one cut brother. My mother always regretted having her last son circumcised because "the doctor said it was best." My youngest brother had the misfortune to be born at the height of the Canadian circumcision epidemic in 1957 and the covering of his sensitive newborn glans was stripped from it with no anesthetic, crushed and amputated.

When I started midwifery practice in the 1970s, protecting infant boys from unnecessary pain by opposing circumcision seemed a natural part of the gentle birth movement. I found that most couples, with the rare exception of practicing Jews and Muslims, could not see any point in cutting their sons. I would do my best to talk even religious clients out of circumcision because I felt that someone had to warn them that their baby would be bloody, sore and fussy for days after the operation. One father of a premature boy wanted to circumcise his tiny five-pound son because he felt it was the right thing to do. He had been circumcised as an infant and thought this was the preferred status for a man. I was able to "educate" him out of the idea and this is a story about that little boy that took place 18 years later:

I was at a coffee shop and a woman came up to me and inquired "Gloria?" I didn't know who she was and she explained to me that I had attended her homebirth 18 years before. The story started to come together for me. I think I didn't recognize her because I had only met her once before she gave birth to her son. The woman had had a heart-shaped uterus and she gave birth at 34 weeks (six weeks early). They insisted on birthing at home and basically told me they would go unassisted if I didn't come to the home. The birth went well, baby weighed about 5 lb and we pumped the colostrum and dropper-fed him for a while but baby thrived. I had a place on my chart where I was prompted to ask "Will your son's penis be left intact?" but I hadn't gotten to that question before they gave birth. I was shocked to find out on day three that the father was making plans to circumcise this tiny little guy. I tried everything I knew to talk him out of it but he was adamant that it would happen. I even threatened to bring out the really nasty colored pictures that I had. He came right back with his

intention to get very nasty with me if I persisted in obstructing him. I was just sick about it. Finally, I dropped off on their kitchen counter a very "bland" pamphlet from our local hospital that really didn't take a position about circumcision pro or con. I don't, to this day, know what hit that father as a mind-changing piece of information but when I came back for the next postnatal visit he had transformed! He told me that after he read the pamphlet he had decided to speak to his own parents about his anger at being cut. Anyway, 18 years later, there I was in a coffee shop with the mother and that boy. He's a big, good-looking man now. The mother said to her son "This is the lady who delivered you and you should thank her for giving you your life." He, of course, didn't know what to say to that but he offered his hand for me to shake. I said to him "No, I didn't deliver you and I didn't give you life—you and your Mom figured all of that out by yourselves. What I would like you to thank me for is your foreskin because I went to bat for you when your Dad thought you should be circumcised, and that part wasn't easy." He looked me in the eyes and really understood what I was saying and gave me a big "Thank you." That was a moment!

## Miracles Unfolding

For 27 years, I have worked locally and admired national women leaders like Marilyn Milos, RN, (founder of NOCIRC), Jeannine Parvati Baker (author of *Hygieia* and *Prenatal Yoga & Natural Childbirth*), Barbara Harper (Waterbirth International) and Nancy Wainer Cohen (co-author of *Silent Knife* and author of *Open Season*). These women take every opportunity when a microphone is in their face to speak up for baby boys. I believed that they were much more qualified than I was to speak publicly against circumcision. I also didn't want to step on people's toes in regard to their religious beliefs.

In September 2005, I enrolled in a course called "Causing the Miraculous." In this course, we were instructed to think about something that we would consider a miracle. What came to mind for me was the end of circumcision in my lifetime. The idea of having this barbaric insanity end forever became so compelling that I made a huge and impossible/possible promise (after all, if you can dream it, it's possible) "Foreskins for Keeps—An Idea Whose Time Has Come: The end of circumcision by January 1, 2007." Just the thought is scary and intimidating; this is a project that has expanded me beyond my known limits.

I let the midwives on the Midwifery Today Forums know what I was thinking and asked them the following questions:

"What if 2006 was a year of intense action to end infant circumcision worldwide? What if we read a headline in 2007 that said 'Infant Circumcision Abolished'? What if no one even knew who or what caused it? What if magical, synergistic incidents occurred that couldn't really be explained, but led to the end result that baby boys were able to keep their foreskins? What would you give to have that happen in your lifetime? What part would you have loved to play? What sort of world would we have if we came to a peaceful and graceful end to circumcision? What new problems could future generations take on because this one was no longer an issue?"

Asking questions is amazing. It begins a process in the minds of others that unleashes their creative powers. One of the replies I received inspired me even more.

Azores wrote:

How amazing if the earth's people didn't suffer immediately after the jolt of birth, coming from such peaceful tranquility to this. If in 2007, male infant circumcision were abolished my heart would beam with exhilaration. Then I'd say 'Okay!! Now let's deal with female circumcision!' because that is when the woes of circumcision will finally end."

What if no one knew who or what caused it? I'd believe that a powerful spiritual force truly existed, and loved us...or maybe aliens? Just kidding.

What would I give to see that happen in my lifetime? Hmm... If I knew that taking a few years off of my life and dying sooner meant no more circumcision, I'd do it. Then, I'd thank every single star every single night for shining so brightly, because my hope and faith in a higher good would be restored.

Which part would I love to play? I'd hope to be one of many working together, making up a much larger force. That is, if human action had any involvement (which I guess could be through prayer?).

What sort of world would we have? Our world would be one of: Anything is possible. Possibly other issues could be resolved just as peacefully and gracefully.

Which problems could future generations take on? More human rights issues. Mass unnecessary birthing intervention, the no-no subject, slavery, abandoned newborns left to die. Suicide, murder, rape, child abuse and many more.

If circumcision were no longer an issue? I'd believe that anything could change, and that all ugly issues had a fighting chance of being resolved.

This brainstorming with my sister midwives took me further afield. I needed to find out who was interested and active and who my partners would be. This took me into domains on the Internet that I never knew existed and introduced me to the giant "Salvation Army of Foreskins" in cyberspace. I had no idea about the many things that were happening in the intactivist movement—the restoring community (men restoring their foreskins), the active participation of gay men in the movement, the lawyers and friendly doctors. The existence of all these diverse groups was news to me. As a birth activist, I've been so used to clashing with doctors that it took a while to realize that I had a terrific resource in "Doctors Opposing Circumcision."

On December 1, 2005, the world lost Jeannine Parvati Baker. When she could barely talk, I told Jeannine she could go because we would see her dream of ending circumcision through to completion and I promised her it would happen sooner, not later. Everything I do to further this cause, I do in tribute to Jeannine and Marilyn Milos who were there before anyone else.

## Canada as a Laboratory for What Works

Ending circumcision has been an exercise in "think globally and act locally." I believe that the province where I live, British Columbia (BC), can be a model of what can be accomplished in other jurisdictions.

Canada still has a long way to go in ending circumcision. One province, Manitoba, had stubbornly refused for years to take circumcision off its publicly-funded medical plan. In November 2005 a baby boy received a circumcision by mistake in a Manitoba hospital. A whistle-blower in the hospital called the press, and the government of Manitoba has now joined all the other Canadian provinces in dropping circumcision as an insured service. We still need to work to close the private clinics that have sprung up throughout Canada but pressure is building to abolish them, too.

In the summer of 2006, a man who had been circumcised as an eight-year-old in a religious residential school for orphans obtained \$12,000 from the BC Medical Plan to have a plastic surgery replacement of his foreskin. This case is an important landmark in ending circumcision in Canada. Once physician's groups and government bureaucrats realize that men who suffered this human rights violation will take action to be compensated in adulthood, all the traditional excuses and justifications for circumcision will

no longer be tolerable. More and more men will get the courage to come forward and share their anger at having unwarranted, irreversible, mutilating surgery without their consent.

## Midwives Making the Difference

The end of circumcision is within view. Every midwife across North America can make a big difference by educating others in her community, standing up to the doctors who resist the end of this barbaric practice and protecting the boys that are born into her hands. Free and easily duplicated resources are available on the Internet. Many organizations have put in place the brochures, posters, videos and advertising that make ending circumcision easy. The first place to visit for resources is NOCIRC ([www.nocirc.org](http://www.nocirc.org)).

Postscript: The Midwifery Today Web site ([www.midwiferytoday.com/forums/](http://www.midwiferytoday.com/forums/)) has a forum for sharing ideas about ending circumcision. Please add your voice to the discussion of strategies and ideas to protect our boys.

You will be reading this article in 2007 and may be thinking "Well, circumcision didn't end in 2006 so that project was a failure." The promise of ending circumcision in a year set things in motion that I could never have anticipated. The new goal is January 1, 2008. Circumcision is ending in the world and the question we all have now is will we be part of ending it faster or not. I invite all midwives to become active in educating their families, friends and clients about the importance of gentle treatment of all newborns. Attachment parenting includes keeping the foreskin attached.

Doctors Opposing Circumcision has an excellent teaching film for medical students on their Web site. It can be downloaded and used for teaching students midwives the importance of the male prepuce.

<http://www.doctorsopposingcircumcision.org/index.html#resources>

Here are some comments from midwives who have seen the video.

Very, very informative. A keeper for me.  
—V.

Thank you for forwarding this. This fits in perfectly with my midwifery reproductive physiology course and I have passed it on to my fellow students.  
—Carol-Anne Brockington, [www.TheBirthDen.com](http://www.TheBirthDen.com)

This was fantastic. Thank you very much. Very informative.  
—Ana Markel



### Gloria Lemay

Gloria Lemay is a lecturer, midwifery educator and traditional birth attendant in Vancouver, BC, Canada. She specializes in VBAC and waterbirth. She has served birthing women since 1976 and is an advisory board member of ICAN and the Canadian Doula Association. Gloria has three grown daughters and one teenage granddaughter. She wants her tombstone to read, "She spoke up for babies."  
[ PHOTO BY A. PRESSMAN ]