



Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri

NATIONAL BIOETHICS COMMITTEE

CIRCUMCISION: BIOETHICAL OUTLINE

(25th September 1998)

abstract

The opinion deals with the subject of male and female circumcision, the NBC acknowledges the duty to respect the plurality of cultures, even when they are manifested in forms far removed from the Western tradition, and the value of correct comparison in cultural diversity. Despite the recognition of respect for different cultures, the Committee considers female circumcision unacceptable as this practice irreversibly mutilates women and violently alters psycho-physical identity, when it does not find a clear justification in the interests strictly of health of the person concerned. The NBC hopes that these practices will be explicitly fought against and proscribed, even with the introduction of new and specific penal legislation.

As regards male circumcision, the Committee agrees that due to its specific characteristics of a therapeutic or prophylactic nature, it should be deemed licit. The document considers that circumcision is an act of a medical nature which produces anatomical and functional modifications to the body, and should be carried out by a physician in full compliance with all the usual standards of hygiene and asepsis. Only in the case of ritual circumcision on the newborn, bearing in mind the simplicity of the operation, some members of the NBC believe that it may be performed even by appointed ministers, provided that they are appropriately and recognisably qualified. Other members of the NBC believe that it is indispensable for a physician to intervene even for the newborn, in order to fully protect their health. However, it is the responsibility of the person carrying out the circumcision to personally guarantee the continuity of care that may be necessary after intervening or to give comprehensive and unambiguous indications so that such care can be effectively provided.

Lastly, public hospitals are required to practice all diagnostic and therapeutic interventions beneficial to the protection of health and especially in circumstances of need or urgency, whatever the cause may be: therefore they are obliged to intervene to remedy circumcisions however and wherever they have been performed.

The NBC believes by great majority that on ethical grounds it would undoubtedly be desirable that members of the peoples or communities that practise circumcision of the newborn for ritual reasons have recourse to private physicians, or public hospitals, but under the system of freelance activities (this is, after all, what commonly occurs for citizens of Jewish faith). In fact, the NBC does not consider that there are ethical and health reasons to induce the State to charge society with the cost of the practise of male circumcision of a ritual nature.