

National News

Attempt to change child's sex was a 'disaster'

Doctors assert that humans "are not psychosexually neutral at birth"

by Lisa Keen

A man without "an adequate penis" would be better off as a woman — that's what most doctors think, according to an article last month in a pediatric medical journal.

But the article, "Sex Reassignment at Birth," in the March 1997 issue of the *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, takes issue with that belief and recommends that doctors stop recommending that boy babies who have abnormally small penises or who lose their penises for some reason be raised as girls.

The recommendation is based on a long-term follow-up study of a boy who was born with a penis, lost it through a freak accident when he was eight months old, and — at the recommendation of doctors — was given a vagina and raised as a girl.

"Initially this individual was described as developing into a normally functioning female," noted the authors, Drs. Milton Diamond and Keith Sigmund, referring to previous medical literature which described this "classic case."

But when they went back to do a "long-term" follow-up, they found that the child, during puberty, rejected life as a female and began to live as a male.

The child in this case, identified in the literature only as John, was born with a penis. When he was eight months old, a doctor performed a cauterization procedure to "repair" a problem with the baby's foreskin but, during the procedure, acci-

dentally burned the penis to the point of destruction.

The conventional wisdom among "many physicians," noted Diamond and Sigmundson, was then and is currently that "it is easier to make a good vagina than a good penis and because the identity of the child will reflect upbringing and the absence of an adequate penis would be psychologically devastating," the damaged penis should be "fashioned" into a "normal looking vulva and vagina" and the child should be raised as a girl. Diamond and Sigmundson said this belief is based on the theories that children are "psychosexually neutral at birth," and that "healthy" development depends upon "the appearance of the genitals."

Over the first few years of the baby's life, doctors performed additional surgery to create a vagina, and his parents began raising him as a girl. Initial follow-up reports indicated that the parents and the child "succeeded in adjusting" to this decision, and the case became a "classic" in medical literature to support the idea that "conventional patterns of masculine and feminine behavior can be altered."

But as Diamond and Sigmundson's follow-up work two years ago reveals, there was no "success." The child's mother recalled that her attempts to raise the child as a girl were "a disaster." Despite "constant attempts ... to convince [the child] to behave more like a girl," the child repeatedly rejected "girl" toys and clothes and modeled the father's ac-

tivities, such as shaving.

The child recalled that, between the ages of 9 and 11, he realized he didn't look, dress, act, or feel like other girls; in fact, he thought, even then, that he was "a guy" but was afraid to "admit" it.

But therapists in the family's "very conservative religious community" told him, "All girls think such things when they're growing up."

The child, during the early teen years, was constantly harassed and teased by other teenagers, especially when insisting on standing up to urinate.

Doctors put the child on the female hormone estrogen, but he rejected them as making him feel "funny." He finally told a doctor that he believed he was a boy, but the physician advised he continue taking the estrogen and "proceed as a girl." But, at age 14, John adamantly decided to "switch to living as a male," and his father, after much "prodding," told John what had happened to him as a baby.

By age 16, he had completed sex reassignment and was living as a boy. Although he was approached sexually by both females and males, he was attracted only to females. The researchers note specifically that "his responses ... [were] not homophobic" toward the male sexual advances.

At age 25, he married a woman and adopted her children.

At follow-up, John's feelings about the doctors' initial recommendation that he

live as a female because he had no penis was: "These people gotta be pretty shallow if that's the only thing they think I've got going for me; that the only reason why people get married and have children and have a productive life is because of what they have between their legs."

In an editorial accompanying the Diamond-Sigmundson report, researcher William Reiner at the Johns Hopkins Hospital, where this particular case unfolded, agreed.

"[T]he organ that appears to be critical to psychosexual development and adaptation is not the external genitalia," he wrote, "but the brain."

Diamond and Sigmundson emphasized, in their conclusions, that "An individual's sexual profile comprises at least five levels: gender patterns, reproduction, sexual identity, arousal and physiological mechanisms, and sexual orientation.

"... The evidence seems overwhelming that normal humans are not psychosexually neutral at birth but are, in keeping with their mammalian heritage, predisposed and biased to interact with environmental, familial, and social forces in either a male or female mode."

"Clinical decisions must ultimately be based not on anatomical predictions, nor on the 'correctness' of sexual function," wrote Reiner in his editorial, "for this is neither a question of morality nor of social consequence.

"... In the end," he said, "it is only the children themselves who can and must identify who and what they are."▼

Woman sues cemetery over lover's headstone

Continued from page 1
lover, and had moved from Philadelphia to California to live together.

"There was just this incredible spark

say: It should include her Hebrew name, a Jewish star, and the inscription: "Beloved life partner, daughter, granddaughter, sister, and aunt. A spirited and compassion-

stone with their own language for the inscription, referring to their "Beloved daughter, sister, granddaughter, and loving friend." And the cemetery began pro-

from honoring the Jewish tradition of unveiling the headstone on the first anniversary of Friedman's burial, the lawsuit also asks the court to award Barone compen-

134-3