

Zwischengeschlecht.org

Human Rights for Hermaphrodites too!

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European Society for Paediatric Urology

ESPU

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Zurich, May 11th 2012

Open Letter of Concern

Dear Board, Scientific Committee and Members of ESPU

Dear Speakers, Chairpersons and Participants of the 23rd Annual Meeting of ESPU

As members of a human rights advocacy group, and as survivors of non-consensual childhood surgeries as well as persons concerned grateful for having escaped such surgeries, we are deeply saddened and concerned about how an apparently overwhelming majority of the speakers and chairpersons at the 23rd Annual Meeting of ESPU covering non-consensual elective surgeries on children seems to refuse to listen to their former patients, and instead continue to advocate and perform medically unnecessary cosmetic genital surgeries on children no matter what the consequences for these children.

For 60 years now, the practice of systematic cosmetic genital surgeries on children with 'atypical' genitals persists. In all these years and decades, the clinicians responsible weren't able to produce any evidence for the alleged benefits to the children concerned, not even adequate follow-ups, or even just to disclose bare statistics, but instead insist on continuing to operate on the basis of mere anecdotal evidence.

For 20 years now, survivors of these surgeries have protested them publicly, describing them consistently as ‘very harmful’^{1 2}, ‘traumatizing’³, ‘immensely destructive of sexual sensation and of the sense of bodily integrity’⁴, and have compared the surgeries and their effects to female genital mutilation⁵ and child sexual abuse⁶. For 20 years now, the clinicians concerned have mainly refused to heed, let alone acknowledge these serious concerns, but instead keep on repeating the same old excuses⁷, ‘essentially impervious to data’⁸.

During the last decade, these accusations of survivors have been backed again and again by human rights experts⁹ and clinicians alike¹⁰.

However, as far as we know the vast majority of the clinicians concerned just keep on turning a blind eye to these criticisms of the surgeries.

Something we find especially regrettable are the repeated statements by clinicians relishing the ‘surgical challenges’, and stubbornly continuing with their ‘experiments’ in the hope that ‘in 20 years surgery will be much better’, seemingly without any care, pity or compassion with their unfortunate past, present and future ‘subjects’.

The same applies to certain approaches towards adult survivors of such surgeries who speak out about their suffering and demand an end of non-consensual cosmetic genital surgeries on children and minors, as well as to the endeavours to marginalise their experiences, to deride them publicly and to deny their right to voice their experiences and opinions. Same as the claims of clinicians, actually to be the ones who are victimized themselves, the alleged victimizers being survivors of non-consensual cosmetic genital surgeries on children and human rights advocates.

We also deeply regret that the 23rd Annual Meeting of ESPU fails to address the ethical and legal implications of non-consensual cosmetic genital surgeries on children, despite the ongoing scholarly and public debate. There are many distinguished experts in the field of Ethics and ‘DSD’, such as Alice Dreger, Katrina Karkazis or Ellen Feder, who engage with these ethical issues, as well as legal experts like Anne Tamar-Mattis. Unfortunately, none of these were invited. In our opinion, this demonstrates a regrettable lack of willingness to listen to critical voices, let alone to enter into a real debate.

There are many reports and statements by Human Rights Advocacy Groups (for example, Terre des Femmes 2004, San Francisco Human Rights Commission 2005, CEDAW 2009, Amnesty Switzerland 2010, Amnesty Germany 2010), as well as publications by experts in these fields (such as Hanny Lightfoot-Klein 2003/2008, Fana Asefaw 2005, Nancy Ehrenreich/Mark Barr 2005), all of them concluding that non-consensual cosmetic surgeries on children gravely violate human rights, particularly the childrens’ right to physical integrity, and who underline the similarities and parallels between these surgeries and the practice of female genital mutilations.

During the last six months alone, the UN-Committee against Torture found non-consensual cosmetic genital surgeries on children in violation of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment¹¹, and on behalf of the German Federal Government, the German Ethics Council issued a statement that explicitly acknowledged the physical and psychological suffering of survivors of non-consensual cosmetic genital surgeries on children¹², stressed their Right to Physical

Integrity and the limits of the parent's rights to consent to cosmetic procedures for their children¹³, and amongst other things proposed reparations for survivors¹⁴ as well as the suspension of the statutes of limitation until adulthood in lawsuits by survivors of non-consensual cosmetic genital surgeries on children¹⁵. At the moment, on behalf of the Swiss Federal Government, the Swiss National Commission on Biomedical Ethics (NEK-CNE) is also in the process of issuing a statement on non-consensual cosmetic genital surgeries on children. And in October 2012, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) will also discuss non-consensual cosmetic genital surgeries on children.

We are sure you are aware of the controversy about non-consensual cosmetic genital surgeries on children becoming better known in the general public every month, as well as of the leaning of the general public regarding genital mutilation, unethical medical experiments and unwanted surgeries.

It is our understanding, that in your capacity as clinicians you have plenty of patients with actual medical needs who depend on your professional help, as well as that the the 23rd Annual Meeting of ESPU also addresses real medical issues with bladder or urethral function.

Therefore, we would like to suggest respectfully that you consider focusing your efforts on helping those patients, whom we are sure that they are deeply grateful for your services, but on the other hand abandon unethical, inhumane and illegal practices like non-consensual cosmetic surgeries on children, while you still can do so on your own terms.

Thank you for your consideration.

Kind regards

for Zwischengeschlecht.org

Daniela Truffer (President)

- 1 ISNA: 'Hypospadias: Parent's Guide to Surgery' <http://www.isna.org/node/81>
- 2 Tiger Howard Devore: 'Endless Calls for „More Research“ as Harmful Interventions Continue' (1995), Hermaphrodites with Attitude, Fall/Winter 1995-96, <http://www.isna.org/files/hwa/winter1996.pdf>
- 3 Emi Koyama: 'Intersex Medical Treatment and Sexual Trauma'
- 4 Cheryl Chase: Letters from Readers. 1993, The Sciences, July/August, 3, <http://www.isna.org/articles/chase1995a>
- 5 ISNA's Amicus Brief on Intersex Genital Surgery (1998) <http://www.isna.org/node/97>
- 6 Tamara Alexander: 'The Medical Management of Intersexed Children: An Analogue for Childhood Sexual Abuse', <http://www.isna.org/articles/analog>
- 7 Alice Dreger: "'Ambiguous Sex"—or Ambivalent Medicine?', The Hastings Center Report May/ Jun 1998, Volume 28, Issue 3 Pages 24-35, http://www.isna.org/articles/ambivalent_medicine
- 8 Cheryl Chase: 'What is the agenda of the intersex patient advocacy movement?' (2002) <http://www.isna.org/agenda>
- 9 e.g. Hanny Lightfoot-Klein: 'Children's Genitals Under the Knife: Cultural Imperatives, Secrecy, and Shame' (2007), Chapter Nine: Intersex Surgery: For the Good of Whom?, p 167-176
- 10 cf. e.g. Emi Koyama: Catherine Minto & Sarah Creighton Fan Page <http://www.ipdx.org/articles/minto-creighton.html>
- 11 Concluding Observations CAT/C/DEU/CO/5, http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cat/docs/co/CAT.C.DEU.CO.5_en.pdf
- 12 German Ethics Council: Empfehlungen 6 und 7 zur medizinischen Behandlung, Stellungnahme "Intersexualität", p. 174
- 13 "Eine erste Einschätzung", <http://diskurs.ethikrat.org/2011/06/eine-erste-einschätzung/>
- 14 8.3.8.1. "Entschädigungsfonds", Stellungnahme "Intersexualität", p. 164-166.
- 15 Empfehlung 14 zur medizinischen Behandlung, Stellungnahme "Intersexualität", p. 176.