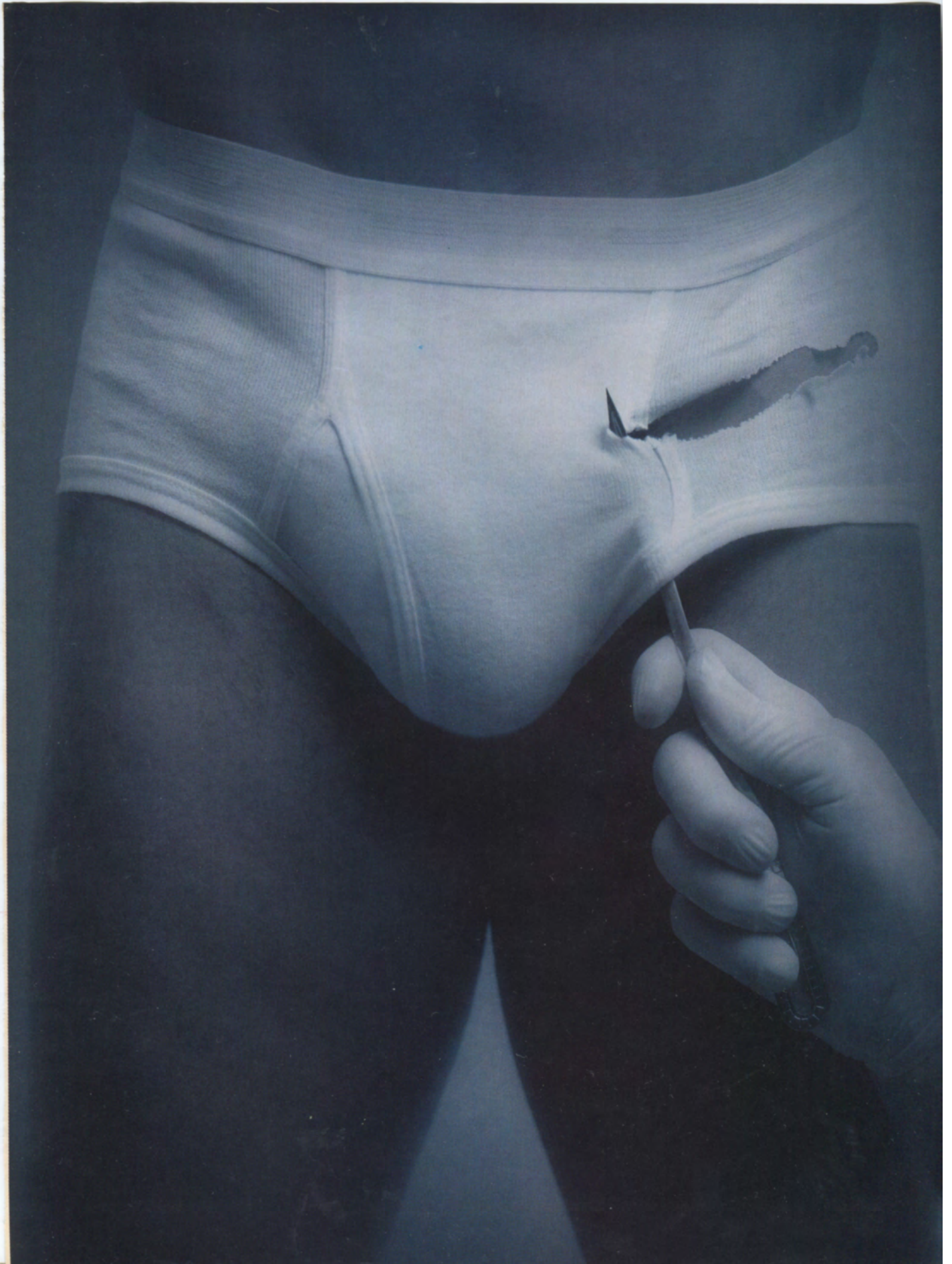
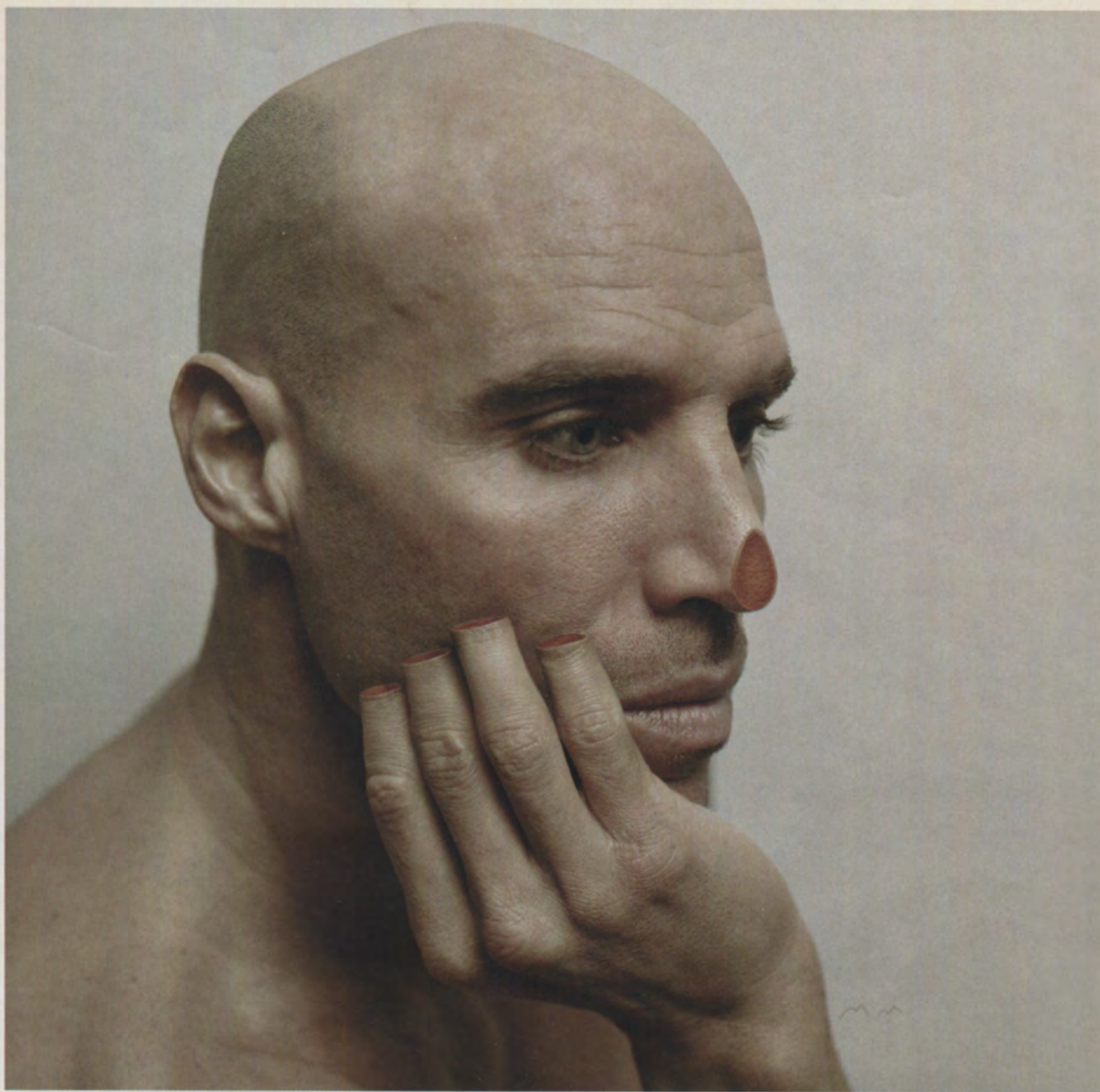


The Foreskin Saga

John Sedgwick takes an up-close look at the increasingly potent movement against male circumcision **PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT MAHURIN**

CHRIS IS 25, TALL, WELL-SPOKEN AND, IN HIS three-button suit, quite handsome. He's classy—that is, eminently presentable, and not at all what I expect, given the bizarre nature of his current “project,” as he calls it. Which is the reason I've come to see him at his downtown Philadelphia office, where he works in higher education. For the past two years, Chris has been “restoring” his foreskin. Stretching it, really. He began by attaching what little free skin he retained postcircumcision to an elastic band that ran down his leg, swinging once around his knee and clipping to his sock. He still wears this contraption every day, all day long, to tug him gently, to return him to what he once was and, he believes, what he should be. Then, at night, he clips the elastic around his shoulder to pull on him some more while he sleeps. With some pride, he told me over the phone that he has attained “full coverage.” And he offered to show me. I probably should have said “No thanks.” Even journalists have their limits, and I didn't relish the prospect of being hit on by a wang-baring stranger. And foreskin restoration sounded like a freak show. ■ But context is everything, and I knew that, at bottom, Chris's project was about something more than just his cock. It wasn't a project at all; it was a cause. He was reasserting the rights of his gender—to remain intact, to obtain sexual pleasure, to not get cut. And in so doing, he was taking the long war over circumci-





sion into a new and possibly final phase. There aren't many restorers. Restoration groups (yes, there are such things) claim that 20,000 men worldwide are stretching themselves, but I'd be surprised if more than a few thousand are at it.

Still, the restorers are the Act Up radicals of the anti-circumcision movement, the ones who ignore the boundaries of what's considered OK. To them circumcision is a question neither of health nor of looking like Dad. It is a matter of inalienable human rights, just as female circumcision is, no matter how many feminists squawk at the analogy. And right now that argument is winning. The American Academy of Pediatrics previously looked favorably upon circumcision but now calls the practice a matter of personal preference. The circumcision rate has fallen to 65 percent of American males, down from 80 percent in 1980. To drive that percentage down further, toward an estimated 15 percent of the rest of the world, Chris is prepared to take drastic action.

He is ready to bare himself to me. How could I not say OK?

In his office, we chat nervously for a few minutes, like strangers on a date. Then we go downstairs and take a cab to my hotel, where I've reserved a room for the viewing. There is a temporary, infuriating snafu when the receptionist declares that, despite assurances to the contrary, my room will not be ready for three hours. But Chris insists on speaking to the manager, who consults his computer and produces a parlor room for us. Alone in the elevator, I compliment Chris on his chutzpah. "If that's what it takes to get people to stop lopping off guys' dicks, then that's what it takes," he says coolly.

There is a foldout bed in the room, but we studiously ignore it. He takes a seat at the table by the window, with me across from him. "When I told my mother I was going to see you, she said that was 'outrageous,'" Chris says. "She said that many, many times." How did his girlfriend react? He smiles. "She said, 'No, no, no, no, no, no, no, NO!'" He reaches into

a shopping bag he's brought with him and pulls out a roll of hospital tape, a short strip of flexible plastic and some scissors. "This is what I've been using," he tells me. His hands shake as he carefully encases the plastic strip in tape to demonstrate the technique, and my breath is not coming too smoothly. I am feeling the power of the moment, the power of overwhelming candor. He looks up at me and asks once more if I'd like to see how it goes on. My heart thumps as I say "Sure." He stands up and pulls down his pants; his shorts follow.

Journalism has taken me many places, but it has never taken me here. My eyes go to his cock, where, sure enough, the head of his penis is covered with a foreskin. An amazingly normal-looking foreskin, slightly bluish. Its only unusual feature is that it is somewhat loose, like a sock that's lost its cling. "I don't have the frenar band," he says sorrowfully, looking down. He refers to the ring of flesh that gives an uncircumcised foreskin its pucker. Then he looks at me again. "To put the tape on, I'll have to get an erection. Would you be comfortable with that?"

For a moment, I have trouble concentrating on what he is saying. *Erection?* I haven't been in the presence of an erection that is not my own since one very strange night in prep school. "Sure," I say again, not that it is the truth.

"I'll have to squeeze it a little," he says, grabbing himself. In moments, his penis flowers into a full-scale hard-on, and I am more than a little awestruck to see an immense phallus rise up a few feet from my nose. His thing is a real missile. Is he getting off on this? Am I? It certainly crosses my mind that this is only a tawdry homoerotic encounter

dressed up with politics, but there's something deeper than sex in the room: two guys figuring out what it is to be a man. He clears away some smegma from the underside ("Sorry about that"), and then he shows me where the foreskin merges with the shaft. He encircles the tape right there. He then lets his dick go limp and pulls the tape up over the tip of his penis. He looks in his shopping bag again and groans. Somehow, in his anxiety, he's forgotten to bring the elastic strap that goes down his leg to his sock. "I'm really sorry," he says. I tell him not to worry. I have a pretty good idea as it is. Besides, I tell him, we've just experienced a major cultural moment together, and I'm not kidding. It's like the early days in the women's movement, when women first put mirrors between their legs to see what they had down there. We've learned something about manhood. He smiles, evidently pleased with the thought. "So what if you show your dick to someone, and so what if you have an erection when that happens?" he says with renewed assurance. "This is going on in the name of something greater." We talk a little more, and when I walk him down the hall to the elevator, I'm tempted to give him a hug. But, of course, I don't.

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, a foreskin has never been just another piece of skin. It has always been an emblem of something more significant. In primitive societies, the foreskin has

long been removed as a rite of passage into manhood, as if the revelation of the member denotes the emergence of the man. For Muslims and Jews, a clipped foreskin is a sign of acceptance of the faith. In this sex-obsessed country, circumcision was first practiced to discourage masturbation. Victorians believed the loose folds of foreskin promoted "self-abuse," as they called it. Indeed, one of the foremost circumcision boosters was Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, of cereal fame, whose sex-averse attitudes were lampooned by T. Coraghessan Boyle in his novel (and in the movie) *The Road to Wellville*. But in the great circumcision debate, actual and metaphorical cleanliness have always been linked, and the antimasturbation arguments were supplemented by those of hygienists, who claimed that a foreskin-enshrouded glans harbored germs. For a long time, Americans have found that case remarkably persuasive. Although circumcision is much less common elsewhere in the world, it is still the most frequently performed surgical procedure for males in the United States.

This surgery has never happened to me. I am one of the rare ones, an intact American male, and, as such, a subject of envy for restorers like Chris. Truth be told, I'd never thought much about my foreskin. I'd been in enough shower rooms to know it was an oddity. And, like other oddities, it was a subject of some mild shame throughout my adolescence. It was like the scar on the small of my back from a childhood operation. That made me different in back, just as this made me different in front. But maybe I was being overly sensitive. The only time I

can remember someone making an issue of it was when a friend called out "Mighty long foreskin, Sedgwick" when I stepped into the communal shower at prep school.

As I grew older, the symbolism shifted. Other guys might be out there—not me. Even when I'm naked, a significant portion of my self remains concealed, making my genitals more internal, like a woman's. I'm hooded, like a monk. It makes my sexuality seem slightly furtive, mysterious. The aesthetics are hard to decide: To my eye, an uncircumcised prick can look droopy and unkempt, but I'm not sure I go for the Nazi-helmet-head style, either, since it looks to me like an inverted erection. I appreciate the added sense of revelation a foreskin can bring to sex, making a hard-on not only a sexual display but also a kind of unveiling, as the head of the penis is dramatically bared as it hardens. This is a matter of taste, but it's an elemental taste. It's more than whether you prefer your shirts tailored or off-the-rack; it's choosing between classical and romantic, tamed and wild.

From what I've read about that first cut, I don't want any part of it. God almighty! Circumcision sounds like something dreamed up by the Marquis de Sade and enacted by the Department of Defense: The newborn baby is strapped down, spread-eagled, on a small board called a Circumstraint. The surgeon slices the foreskin lengthwise to peel it forcibly from

One doctor sliced into the foreskins of twenty-one cadavers.

the glans. (The foreskin doesn't naturally separate from the head of the penis for several years; until then, it adheres to the skin underneath.) Then comes the clamp. One of the most common is the Gomco clamp, a demonic-looking device that fits tightly around a bell that is slipped under the foreskin and over the head of the baby's penis. The clamp is tightened, crushing the foreskin, which is then removed with a scalpel. Just the thought of this makes me cup my hands over my privates. O the blood! O the wailing! Incredibly, for years this procedure was done without anesthesia, in the belief that babies felt no pain. Right.

It was the pain that got to Marilyn Milos. She was a postpartum nurse at Marin General Hospital in California during the late 1970s and early '80s, and more than any other person, she has been the one to cause the downturn in the circumcision rate in the years since 1980. Revolutions have to start somewhere. Milos had had her own three boys circumcised, but she started to question the practice when she heard the babies yowling and saw them turning red when they went under the knife. "The doctors kept saying, 'It doesn't hurt. It only takes a second. And it will protect them from every horror that could ever befall them,'" she recalls. "But I thought, Yeah? Well, then, why are the babies screaming?"

When she received no good answer to that question, she videotaped the procedure to show it to expectant mothers

ment. After that the anti-circ groups proliferated like weeds—BUFF, UNCIRC, DOC. There were information centers, Web sites, support groups.

But none of them would have had the impact they have had if not for a Canadian pathologist named John R. Taylor, who discovered the key element the anti-circ movement lacked: the sex angle. Taylor had gotten into a disagreement with his son-in-law over whether or not to circumcise Taylor's grandson. Born in England, Taylor was not circumcised; the son-in-law was. Determined to resolve the dispute scientifically, Taylor sliced into the foreskins of twenty-one uncircumcised cadavers (a grisly job, surely) to conduct the first detailed analysis of the delicate tissue of the foreskin's ridged band. "There have been lots of circumcisions done," Taylor notes dryly. "You'd rather think that doctors would know what they were removing. It turns out they didn't." Taylor's results, published in the *British Journal of Urology* in 1996, showed that the foreskin, far from being "extra," is one of the most sensitive parts of a man's body. The last inch or two—the part that's routinely cut off—contains ten to twelve ridges that are replete with specialized nerve endings, called Meissner's corpuscles, that, Taylor writes, "may be compared with similar nerve endings in the fingertips and lips." Whereas the foreskin is loaded with nerves, the head of the denuded penis is a blunt instrument. "[It] is insensitive to

"If you think of sexual pleasure equaling sensation times time, I'll take the time," says

and discourage them from opting for what doctors often described as "a little trim." When the hospital refused to allow her to show the tape, she got really steamed. "They were trying to hush me. They said I was upsetting the patient," she recalls, still furious. "I said, 'No, the baby's the patient, and nobody's more upset than he is.'" Milos and another nurse went on to found the National Organization of Circumcision Information Resource Centers, or NOCIRC, the first national organization aimed at eliminating the routine circumcision of infant boys. "Circumcised men have been primally wounded, tortured and mutilated when too little to defend themselves, and the best part of their penis has been thrown into the trash can," she exclaims, pulling out all the rhetorical stops.

NOCIRC, in turn, inspired R. Wayne Griffiths, a sociology professor turned construction inspector in the San Francisco Bay area, to restore his foreskin. If he wasn't the first to do that, he was the first to make a big deal about it. First he used tape to try to stretch himself. Growing impatient, he acquired a pair of stainless-steel ball bearings—one an inch in diameter, the other an inch and a quarter—to dangle off himself. After two years, he had his foreskin back. Griffiths founded an organization for other restorers, called NORM, for National Organization of Restoring Men. NORM, in turn, turned on Tim Hammond, a massage therapist and human rights activist. He added a political arm, NO-HARMM (for National Organization to Halt the Abuse and Routine Mutilation of Males), to the anti-circ move-

light touch, heat, cold and, as far as the authors are aware, to pinprick," Taylor reports. Worse, the head becomes less sensitive the longer it is exposed to the elements postcircumcision, due to a callusing-type process called keratinization. The son-in-law decided to spare his newborn son the knife.

Since writing the article, Taylor has gone further, suggesting that, besides having an exquisite sensitivity, the foreskin appears to play a major role in triggering orgasm. He notes that the muscles that produce an orgasm automatically contract when the foreskin is pulled back during penetration. Taylor speculates this might have an evolutionary purpose, to encourage the deep thrusting that fires sperm directly into the cervix, improving the chance of conception.

Marilyn Milos of NOCIRC adds that the foreskin naturally slides over the ridge of the penis during sex, producing heavenly sensations for the man and reducing friction for the woman. Milos has had a husband of each type, and she much prefers the uncircumcised variety—"intact" is the word she uses. "With a circumcised penis, it feels like I'm being penetrated by a doorknob," she says bluntly. "It's a dry, hardened dowel." In her experience, the circumcised man concentrates excessively on his frenulum—the ridge of delicate flesh on the underside of the penis, just below the head—whereas the uncircumcised one gleefully presses all around, giving her a fuller, more satisfying experience. As for her current, circumcised husband: "We're experimenting. We're trying new positions."

Armed with this new information, the anti-circers go so far

as to argue that male circumcision is equally as horrendous as female circumcision, even when it involves a clitorrectomy. To them, removing the foreskin is as bad as removing the clitoris. While neither of these genital areas is essential to sex (a woman without a clitoris can reach orgasm, just as a circumcised man can), both certainly enhance and facilitate it. Female circumcision has been banned by federal law since 1996, but the male variety is still legal. "No part of a female's genitalia may be cut off for religious or cultural reasons, but you can freely lop off 50 percent of a boy's shaft skin," Tim Hammond of NOHARMM says angrily.

As is usual with such disputes, the revolutionaries are far more organized and aggressive than the traditionalists. There is no pro-circ movement. If there were, it would most likely be headed by Edgar Schoen, M.D., a senior consultant in pediatrics at the Kaiser Permanente Medical Care Program in Oakland. He headed the 1989 American Academy of Pediatrics task force on circumcision, which was the latest one to come out in favor of the practice, and to this day Schoen is a "very strong" believer in the value of circumcision as a preventive health measure. The circumcised penis is simply less prone to disease, he says. According to his studies at Kaiser Permanente, uncircumcised baby boys have a rate of urinary-tract infections ten times greater than that of their circumcised counterparts, and later in life, uncir-

new toy," he says proudly. "And I don't want to keep it to myself." He used to be shy when the girls at strip clubs pulled down his zipper. "They'd go, like, *ew*," he says. Not anymore. "Now I'm more outgoing. If I'm at a club, I'll pull my joint out and, like, do it right there." And he lasts much longer, too. It used to be that he could go for an hour and a half. Now, he swears, he can last three and a half hours. How would he rate his newly shorn penis? "I give it a ten straight out."

As Kunin points out, the most important six inches in sex are the ones between your ears. So it is not so surprising that Orville should find ecstasy in his clipped cock or that Chris should find his in a restored one. Sex is what you make it. Still, it does seem cruel that such a fateful decision as circumcision is invariably made for a man before he is old enough to decide for himself. Why not let him do it later if he wants, as Orville chose to do? Yes, there is the evidence of infant urinary-tract infections, but even the 2 percent that Edgar Schoen found in uncircumcised infants is still less than what girls experience a few years later. (Doctors in favor of circumcision argue that the boys' infections can be serious, potentially leaving kidney scars.) Penile cancer is truly a wretched disease, but it is also a rare one, with only 1,500 cases a year, and 200 to 300 deaths, in the United States, most of them in old men. And as for HIV/AIDS, men should be wearing condoms, anyway.

one urologist. "And you know who wants the time more than the guy? The girl."

cumcised men are twenty times more likely to have invasive penile cancer, which Schoen terms a "horrible disease [that] rots away your genitalia and every other darn thing." There is also evidence from Africa that circumcised men are less likely to contract HIV/AIDS from an infected female, since foreskins can have tiny abrasions that offer avenues for the virus to enter the body.

When I mention the anti-circ line that sex might be better for the uncircumcised, Schoen scoffs: "Wrong! Wrong!" He declares there is no study showing this, although he acknowledges it would be difficult to design one that provided a scientific basis for comparison. Instead, he points to a survey of Iowa women who, by a wide margin, said they preferred a man's penis to be circumcised, largely because it's cleaner and more "normal." If the foreskin is particularly sensitive, however, it stands to reason that men would lose sensation if it's removed. Samuel Kunin, a urologist and mohel in the Los Angeles area who has performed between 6,000 and 7,000 circumcisions, acknowledges as much, but he says that any loss of sensation is more than made up for by the increased staying power of the circumcised man. "If you think of sexual pleasure equaling sensation times time, I'll take the time," he says. "And you know who wants the time more than the guy? The girl."

A fellow named Orville would agree. Now 23, he had himself circumcised at 21 after moving to New York from the West Indies, where circumcision isn't practiced. He couldn't be happier with his trimmed dick. "It's like I got this

Undoubtedly, with all the anti-circ politics cropping up, some men are becoming unduly exercised about an issue that their fathers (and most other men) have thought nothing about. NORM's R. Wayne Griffiths spends hours on the phone counseling men who are filled with rage over what was taken from them. "They are as angry as anyone can possibly be," he says: "Lots of them can't even talk to their parents anymore, they are so mad at them." That rage is probably misplaced. But it is shocking that given the emphasis the culture places on sexuality, a primary sex receptor is routinely cut off by doctors who, with the blessing of uninformed parents, assume they are doing their tiny patients a favor. Here in the First World, we often laugh at the "barbaric" customs of the Third. But, frankly, routine circumcision, despite being sanctioned by the medical establishment, seems just as barbaric as anything done in Africa, the Middle East or Asia—so barbaric that it makes foreskin restoration seem reasonable. Talking to Chris, I ask him what he thinks when he steps into a shower room now and sees all the circumcised penises. "It's like they're all wounded," he says. "All I can think of is the scar." Today, when I look around, I realize I've started to think that way myself. I wouldn't go so far as to say that a foreskin is the key to happiness, but I'm glad to have mine. And, by God, I'm going to keep it. ■

John Sedgwick is a GQ writer-at-large. His psychological thriller, The Dark House, will be published in August by HarperCollins.