



# EAP Educates: Male Circumcision in South Africa

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Ritual circumcision is a practice carried out around the world across many cultures, and the practice in South Africa makes headline news annually with many young men being hospitalised or dying as a result of complications that have arisen from traditional initiation rites.

Rituals are a means for society to communicate values and ways of living. This is done through psychological, social and symbolic interactions and teaching. Male initiation rites illustrate the transition from boyhood to manhood. It is an important social device that deals with the training required to enable the shift from childhood behaviour to more complex behaviour expected in adulthood. A key aspect of initiation schools is the transfer of cultural knowledge. Young men are trained in courtship and marriage practices, and the cultural expectations regarding social responsibility etc. are laid out for the initiates. Their status changes and they earn numerous privileges with this change.

## Ritual circumcision and health complications

There are five factors that have been attributed to ritual circumcision becoming a health issue

1. Training and competence of the traditional surgeon – errors in surgical technique can arise from inadequate training, and surgeons are at times, found to be operating under the influence of alcohol
2. Sterility and reuse of surgical instruments – an assegai is the traditional surgical instrument. Blunt and reused instruments can result in complications
3. Sexually Transmitted Diseases – youth are becoming sexually active at an increasingly young age, and as a result of that, the prevalence of STD's amongst initiates is higher. These diseases are passed on through the use of equipment that has not been sterilised.
4. Aftercare medical complications – septicaemia is the cause of most deaths related to circumcision. The care of the initiate after the procedure is critical to ensure there is no infection and or ischaemia (starvation of blood supply).
5. Severe dehydration – initiates are discouraged from drinking fluids post circumcision to prevent frequent urination and as a test of endurance. Severe dehydration may result.

Community members are aware of the health risks associated with ritual circumcision, but traditional social distancing is enforced and they are unable to influence what happens at these events. Some people interviewed see this as a process of "natural selection" and any initiates who suffer complications are inflicted with these because of some form of wrong doing and have therefore brought this on themselves. Hospitalisation is often strongly resisted by initiates who develop complications because they risk stigmatisation and abandonment by their families, as well as being ostracised by their communities because the status of their manhood is unclear due to medical intervention.

For many people who practice ritual circumcision as a cultural institution, there is no other alternative. Without this initiation, males may not get married, start families, inherit possessions or officiate at ceremonies. Medical circumcisions performed by professionals who substitute traditional equipment and dressings with medical ones are deemed meaningless. We need to creatively address the issues where a strong cultural belief is at odds with Western Medical methods to reduce the mortality and morbidity associated with ritual circumcision.

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