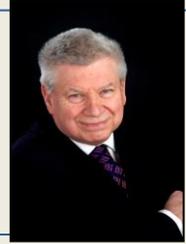


Medicine for Managers

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Female Genital Mutilation

Female Genital Mutilation is a practice which is illegal in the United Kingdom. It is totally abhorrent and a distasteful procedure to which huge numbers of infants and young girls are subjected every year. The purpose of FGM is, almost unbelievably in today's world, to inhibit a woman's sexual feelings. The loss of libido believed to be induced is to discourage sexual activity before marriage.

The procedure is carried out by so-called 'circumcisers', women who enjoy high professional standing within their communities.

matter of days old to age eight, although sometimes it is done to age twelve or fourteen.

Sometimes, though, it is actually done by midwives, nurses and even by conventionally trained doctors.

FGM is totally abhorrent and to think about it and the physical destruction associated with it is nauseating. One's heart goes out to women who have suffered this and I suspect that, whatever excuse is used [social, religious or cultural] many will agree that no punishment for the perpetrators is too harsh or too painful.

The FGM may be done in a variety of ways

and is classified by type.

All are horrific. The simplest procedures involve the amputation or destruction of part or all of the clitoris and some 80% of affected women have suffered this disfigurement. A more radical procedure

It is hard to imagine just how primitive it all is. The mutilation, called 'cutting' by the operators, is carried out without the benefit of anaesthetic and without any attention to any sort of sterility using a ragbag of equipment such as knives, razor blades, crudely shaped glass or even scissors.

involves removal of the inner lips or labia (the folds of skin that surround the vagina) and sometimes even the larger external labia.

The target of these 'circumcisers' are girls before the age of puberty, ranging from a

This may be followed by sewing up of the external lips (if left) to leave only a small hole for normal bodily functions. In such

cases women giving birth either tear the scar as delivery proceeds or the scar must be surgically opened; either way much additional pain is the result. Some women have a ragbag of surgical attacks on their genital areas with burning, cutting or induction of scarring by using corrosive agents.

The statistics are terrible. It is estimated that half a million girls and women are threatened by or have suffered FGM in the European Union, about 60,000 (or maybe more) of whom live in Great Britain.

Because the damage is hidden, the true extent may be much greater. It has its greatest prevalence in Africa. Like everywhere else the procedure is claimed to be a fundamental part of the culture, religion or social convention and it is justified on this basis. In some countries in Africa, such as Somalia, it is believed that up to 98% of women may have been maimed in this way.

Because of the primitive nature of the procedure, the risks are high and the consequences are of severe pain, shock, bleeding, infection, damage to the urethra (the tube leading from the bladder to the outside) resulting in inability to urinate and a variety of other damage caused by the crude nature of the instruments and their handlers, particularly faced with a violently squirming child who has to be restrained by adults.

Other complications of a more long-term nature may follow the initial healing. They may include recurrent urinary infections, vaginal infections, abnormal periods and damage to the general area because of inappropriate scarring.

It is hard to imagine the psychological trauma that these women must sustain, including fear of sexual contact, loss of libido, anxiety, post-traumatic stress and also the physical pain of intercourse.

Treatment for those women who have suffered FGM is variable.

The mutilation and the psychological damage with which they are left may need psychological support and psychiatric care.

The damaged genital area may require further surgery to make intercourse more comfortable and to facilitate pregnancy.

The surgery offered is sometimes called 'reversal', although it is not possible to reverse the damage caused to the sensitive clitoral and vulval areas that are removed or destroyed.

The procedure involves opening the labial area by division of scars, together with any possible refashioning of damaged tissue. It may be carried out using local anaesthetic, spinal anaesthesia or general anaesthesia.

FGM is illegal. Transport of a child abroad to procure FGM is also illegal. If caught, punishment is severe for perpetrators.

If anyone suspects that a child may be at risk of such a horrible procedure, a report should be made to the local social services or to the police.

In a world in which we are moving, albeit slowly towards equality for women this terrible and ghastly procedure stands out as a human disgrace and should be eliminated.

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