

Female Genital Mutilation: Your Questions Answered

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What is female genital mutilation?

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is the collective term for a number of procedures, involving cutting or removal of the external female genitalia. Some of these procedures are minor in nature, while others involve significant intervention. It is usually performed on girls or adolescent women.

In the past, FGM has been called female circumcision.

Where is FGM practised?

FGM is practised in many parts of the world and has been documented in more than 40 countries.

AFRICA: FGM is practised in approximately 24 countries including Somalia, Sudan, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Kenya, as well as some parts of western and central Africa.

ASIA: FGM occurs among some groups in the Philippines, Malaysia, Pakistan, India and Indonesia.

EUROPE: In ancient times FGM was used as a cure for nymphomania, hysteria, insanity, depression and epilepsy. In recent years, it is found to exist in some European countries that have admitted immigrants from countries where the practice still exists.

LATIN AMERICA: FGM does occur among some groups in Brazil, eastern Mexico and Peru.

MIDDLE EAST: The United Arab Emirates,

South Yemen, Bahrain and Oman all have communities that practise FGM.

Is FGM practised in Australia?

There is no documented evidence that FGM is practised in Australia. However, there are adults affected by FGM resident in Australia who underwent the procedure overseas.

Why is FGM practised?

FGM is deeply rooted in tradition and is supported by a wide range of beliefs and sociological pressures. It is thought by some that FGM prevents a woman seeking sexual partners before or outside marriage, thus ensuring her fidelity as a wife. Psycho-sexual reasons include beliefs that a non-excised woman cannot conceive, or is not chaste. Some believe it is a form of contraceptive, while others believe it enhances fertility.

Sociological reasons given to support the practice of FGM include making all females equal, the preservation of family honour, the protection of girls from rape in times of war, increasing a girl's marriageability, fostering social cohesion, giving a girl access to resources in the community and avoiding the mockery and isolation experienced by girls who have not undergone the practice.

In those communities where it is common practice, girls who have not undergone FGM are considered unclean, especially in those cultures where cleanliness is a valued virtue.

Is FGM a religious practice?

FGM is not a religious practice. It predates religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The practice has frequently been carried out in the genuine but erroneous belief

that it was demanded by religious faiths.

What are the benefits of FGM?

There are no identified benefits from the practice. Efua Dorkenoo, an internationally distinguished writer on FGM notes "No reputable medical practitioner would agree that mutilation is good for the physical or mental health of females while a growing number of research and case histories indicate its grave permanent damage to health, underlining the risks of death".

What are the effects of FGM?

The effects of FGM can vary. Not all women will experience severe ill-effects, but many do.

The immediate physical effects can include violent pain, backache, suppressed pain, haemorrhage, post-operative shock, damage to other organs, acute urine retention, tetanus and septicaemia. HIV and Hepatitis B transmission is also known to occur when simultaneous operations are performed on a group of girls.

Long term effects can include difficulties with sexual intercourse, menstrual problems, recurrent urinary and kidney infections, chronic infections of the uterus and vagina, infertility, acute problems during labour and birth, incontinence, prolapses, chronic vulval abscesses difficulty in using contraceptive methods and sexual dysfunction.

The psychological effects can include anxiety prior to operation, trauma, sense of humiliation, sense of betrayal by parents, severe depression, loss of sleep and post traumatic stress syndrome, which can resurface.

The psychological effects are mostly manifested when affected people are removed from the community in which the practice is common.

What are the health needs of women affected by FGM?

The health needs of women affected by the practice depend on the particular consequences being experienced by each woman. They may include regular gynaecological checkups, counselling, intensive pre-natal and post-natal care, restorative surgery, menopausal care, special family planning services and access to female health care workers.

What are Australian governments doing about FGM?

In 1994, the NSW Government legislated against the practice. The legislation makes the practice of FGM illegal in NSW, and provides for a maximum 7 years goal term for anyone found guilty of practising FGM. It is also illegal for FGM to be carried out overseas on anyone who is normally resident in NSW. Legislation has also been passed in South Australia.

In addition to the Legislation, the NSW Government has initiated a Community Education Program run by the Ethnic Affairs Commission. The program has three strands:

1. An education program for the general community and those communities where FGM is practised in the country of origins.
2. Working with professional groups, such as health, welfare and education personnel to develop an understanding of FGM and appropriate protocols for dealing with women affected by the practice; and
3. Production of information resources.

The Commonwealth Government has allocated \$3.6 million over 5 years from 1995 for an education and assistance program to deal with FGM. In 1995, NSW will receive \$140,000 of this funding.

For further information

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