

“He died because it was traditionally done at the pit ‘Muganda,’ so...that gave me fear” – the impact of traditional circumcision on the scale-up of male circumcision services in Zambia, TUPE389

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BACKGROUND

- The Population Council evaluated the informed consent (IC) process for male circumcision (MC) during scale up of services in Lusaka, Zambia (2009-2010).
- A key study objective was to explore how cultural norms, such as traditional circumcision, practiced by some Zambian tribes, affect the MC decisionmaking process.

METHODS

Population and interview mode:

- 62 MC clients (34 adults ≥18 years old; 28 adolescents, 13-17 years old) participated in semi-structured interviews 7 days post-MC.
- 6 focus group discussions were conducted with 36 parents/guardians of adolescents 13-17 years old:
 - Half had chosen MC for their sons (n = 18); and
 - Half had not chosen MC for their sons (n = 18).
- 13 key informants (MC service providers, community leaders, MOH officials) took part in in-depth interviews.

Data collection and analysis:

- Adults provided written IC for study participation; both parental consent and adolescent assent were required for adolescent participation.
- Interviews were conducted by local researchers in the language(s) most comfortable for participants (Bemba, Nyanja, English or a mixture).
- Transcripts not originally in English were translated before analysis.
- A code book was developed based on key domains in the study protocol, and was adapted based on actual interviews.
- Atlas.ti software was used to facilitate analysis, which was based on phases of the MC process, beginning with the decisionmaking process, including motivating factors for undergoing MC surgery.

RESULTS

When asked how they decided to choose MC (or not), about half of the clients (adults and adolescents) and most parents/guardians spontaneously mentioned the influence of traditional circumcision.

POSITIVE INFLUENCES

- Some MC clients learned about disease prevention from friends and relatives practicing traditional circumcision:

My brother-in-law who comes from North-Western province and there circumcision is tradition and part of the culture...he also encouraged me to come for circumcision to protect myself from . . . diseases.

18-year-old client, YWCA

- Several MC clients had beliefs about traditional circumcision and improved sexual performance:

...when we were growing up, one of my friends was circumcised, although it was traditionally done and I think I used to admire him. The guy had sexual class...

35-year-old client, Beit Cure

...in our tradition, they say someone who is circumcised is a man in bed.

18-year-old client, YWCA

- A few MC clients and parents/guardians from traditionally-circumcising tribes chose medical MC as a safer or less costly option:

I just wanted to do it under surgical, meaning coming here where they observe some precautions... under tradition, there are a lot of risks, the same knife they are using to maybe 10 or 100 people....

Brother of a 14-year-old boy who was circumcised, YWCA

My father wanted me to go for the traditional one. Then my mother refused and said there was no money... so my mother then advised me to go to the hospital because it was free.

13-year-old client, Kafue

- Some respondents described a movement toward merging medical MC with traditional circumcision:

They still retain the traditional part—many of them now want their child to be circumcised in a medical centre, then they continue with the traditional elsewhere.

Male key informant, MC provider, University Teaching Hospital (UTH), Lusaka

NEGATIVE INFLUENCES

- For many adolescents, knowledge of traditional circumcision led to heightened anxiety about medical MC:

My first reaction [to MC] was...I can't do it...because people die, come on... if you take it more traditionally, people usually die with such kind of stuff, because the bleeding thing—if you are not told how to keep it, you can easily lose blood.

17-year-old client, Kudu

I was in grade seven then, our teacher was teaching us about “mukanda” [traditional MC]...so it was kind of scaring, because they don't even put any medicine, you just bleed and bleed, some maybe even die.

15-year-old client, YWCA

- Traditional MC seemed to prompt the greatest concern among parents/guardians who chose not to circumcise their sons:

I am refusing as a parent because according to our tradition, we don't do circumcision. So there is no way I can accept my son, just because it's new generation....

Father of a 13-year-old boy who was not circumcised, Kudu

With me, it's not my tradition or my tribe, so if I take my child for circumcision then it is a taboo. What is happening is that how do I even understand it, because even my ancestors have never gone through it. It's like it something for the Kalubales and we have to separate our tribe...out of 72 tribes in Zambia there is only one or two that practice it.

Mother of a 13-year-old boy who was not circumcised, Kafue

- Key informants explained that traditional circumcision could present a barrier to medical MC, particularly for people with lower levels of education:

There are some communities that are saying, no, circumcision is a tradition and when you talk about it to them, they don't even want to hear anything about male circumcision, they consider it as if it's a taboo.

Male key informant, MC Counselor, Kudu

- Some parents/guardians were fearful about medical MC based on their limited knowledge of traditional circumcision:

He died because it was traditionally done at the pit “muganda,” so, as a result, that gave me fear and I noticed that [MC] was not good.

Father of a 16-year-old boy who was not circumcised, Kafue

- Some parents/guardians had not actively refused circumcision, but had not felt well-enough informed to make a proper decision, because MC was not part of their tradition:

...as we were growing up, it was a lifestyle for us Bembas not to circumcise children...back then it was strictly traditional and the question was where do I start from if am to have my son circumcised.

Mother of a 15-year-old boy who was not circumcised, YWCA

The way I look at the issue of MC, people can have an interest if it can be advertised on the radio the way HIV/AIDS is publicized, especially on TV... if in the same way they come up with a TV program and teach people about MC as well as its benefits to males, people will develop an interest and they would want to have their sons circumcised and many will realize that the practice of the Luvalas is good after all.

Mother of a 15-year-old boy, not circumcised, YWCA

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Traditional circumcision has a mixed impact on the decision to undergo MC.
- Community sensitization to promote MC should address fears and barriers associated with traditional circumcision:
 - Providing practical information (eg the wound is stitched after the foreskin is removed, shortening the healing period and reducing the chance of complications) may help distinguish medical MC from traditional circumcision;
 - Emphasizing the medical benefits (reduced risk of HIV/STIs, improved hygiene, prevention of cancers) may help to promote medical MC for those from non-circumcising tribes; and
 - Stressing that MC is part of a broader HIV prevention package may help to encourage parents from non-circumcising tribes to feel more comfortable choosing MC for their sons.
- Organizations providing medical MC should consider collaborating with tribes that already perform circumcision and should explore actively engaging with traditional circumcisers to incorporate medical MC into traditional practices.