

Efforts to Ban Circumcision Gain Traction in California

Monica Almeida/The New York Times

Jena Troutman is campaigning for a ban on circumcising boys in Santa Monica, Calif. “I am just a mom trying to save the little babies,” Ms. Troutman said.

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SANTA MONICA, Calif. — When a group of activists proposed banning [circumcision](#) in San Francisco last fall, many people simply brushed them aside. Even in that liberal seaside city, it seemed implausible that thousands of people would support an effort to outlaw an ancient ritual that Jews and Muslims believe fulfills a commandment issued by God.

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Rabbi Yehuda Lebovics opposes a ban.

But last month, the group collected the more than 7,100 signatures needed to get a measure on the fall ballot that would make it illegal to snip the foreskin of a minor within city limits. Now a similar effort is under way in Santa Monica to get such a measure on the ballot for November 2012.

If the anticircumcision activists (they prefer the term “intactivists”) have their way, cities across the country may be voting on whether to criminalize a practice that is common in many American hospitals. Activists say the measures would protect children from an unnecessary medical procedure, calling it “male genital mutilation.”

“This is the furthest we’ve gotten, and it is a huge step for us,” said Matthew Hess, an activist based in San Diego who wrote both bills.

Mr. Hess has created similar legislation for states across the country, but those measures never had much traction. Now he is fielding calls from people who want to organize similar movements in their cities.

“This is a conversation we are long overdue to have in this country,” he said. “The end goal for us is making cutting boys’ foreskin a federal crime.”

Jewish groups see the ballot measures as a very real threat, likening them to bans on circumcision that existed in Soviet-era Russia and Eastern Europe and in ancient Roman and Greek times. The circumcision of males is an inviolable requirement of Jewish law that dates back to Abraham’s circumcision of himself in the Book of Genesis.

They say the proposed ban is an assault on religious freedom that could have a widespread impact all over the country. Beyond the biblical, there are emotional connections: checking for circumcision was one of the ways Jewish children could be culled from their peers by Nazis and the czar’s armies.

“People are shocked that it has reached this level because there has never been this kind of a direct assault on a Jewish practice here,” said Marc Stern, associate general counsel for the American Jewish Committee, an advocacy group. “This is something that American Jews have always taken for granted — that something that was so contested elsewhere but here, we’re safe and we’re secure.”

Mr. Hess also writes an online comic book, “[Foreskin Man](#),” with villains like “Monster Mohel.” On Friday, the Anti-Defamation League issued a [statement](#) saying the comic employed “grotesque anti-Semitic imagery.”

Jena Troutman, the mother of two young boys who is promoting the ballot measure in Santa Monica, said she did not think of herself as a crusader against religion. Instead, she views her work as a chance to educate would-be parents against a procedure that “can really do serious damage to the child.”

“I am just a mom trying to save the little babies,” Ms. Troutman said. “I’d rather be on the beach, but nobody is talking about this, so I have to.”

Ms. Troutman has run the Web site [wholebabyrevolution.com](#) for two years, and she is fond of rattling off sayings like “Your baby is perfect, no snipping required.” Well versed in the stories of circumcisions gone awry, she said the recent [death of a New York City toddler](#) who was circumcised at a hospital convinced her that she should push for the ballot measure.

Ms. Troutman, who has worked as a [lactation](#) educator and a doula, said she often approached women on the beach to warn them about the dangers of circumcising, but she has declined to answer questions about her own children.

Although precise numbers are not known, several studies have indicated that circumcision rates have been declining in the United States for the past several years and now range from [30 percent](#) to 50 percent of all male infants.

Many medical groups take a neutral approach, saying that the practice is not harmful and that there is not enough scientific evidence to conclude that it is necessary, and leave the decision to parents and their doctor. Several studies have linked circumcision with [a reduction in the spread of H.I.V.](#) Roughly half of the 694 baby boys born in the Santa Monica-U.C.L.A. Medical Center and Orthopaedic Hospital in 2010 were circumcised before they left the hospital, officials there said.

Dr. David Baron, a family physician, certified mohel — someone who performs ritual circumcision — and former chief of staff at Santa Monica-U.C.L.A., said that he would not press any parent to circumcise a son but that he viewed the effort to ban the procedure as “ridiculous and dishonest.”

“To say it is mutilation is wrong from the get-go,” Dr. Baron said. “It is a perfectly valid decision to say that it is not what you want for your child. Any doctor who says it is needed is not being honest, but to say that it needs to be banned is shocking.”

If the ballot measure passed, it would certainly face legal challenges. But several legal experts said it was far from certain that it would be struck down in a court. Ms. Troutman said she considered putting religious exemptions in the measure, but then decided, “Why should only some babies be protected?”

Rabbi Yehuda Lebovics, an Orthodox mohel based in Los Angeles who says he has performed some 20,000 circumcisions over several decades, said he often had to soothe nervous mothers.

“I am now doing the sons of the boys I did 30 years ago,” Rabbi Lebovics said. “So I turn to the new mother and ask, ‘Do you have any complaints in the way it turned out?’ ”^A

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