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The folly of defying sexuality

Before modern birth control was widely available, it was common to sterilize the mentally handicapped. In most of Canada this was done by private arrangement between parents and physicians, but Alberta and British Columbia created public agencies to authorize eugenic sterilizations.

Alberta, last year, reached a negotiated agreement with the surviving victims of this policy. Each will receive a minimum of \$75,000 compensation, and substantially more will go to the minority, misdiagnosed as retarded, who could have become capable parents.

Three factors came together in 1928 to produce the Alberta Sexual Sterilization Act. One was the real problem of a growing number of mentally handicapped persons whose sexuality had to be managed somehow. The second factor was the ambition of medical authoritarians, armed with the science of the day (eugenics), to conduct surgical experiments on persons unable to give informed consent. The third was a feminist movement (the United Farm Women of Alberta) favouring involuntary sterilization as part of a broad agenda of social sanitation.

A similar unholy trinity appears in the case of David Reimer, revealed in John Colapinto's new book: *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl*.

The real problem was that David (then called Bruce) Reimer suffered a bungled circumcision at St. Boniface Hospital in 1966, when he was eight months old. The attending physician used too much power on the electrocautery machine, burning the boy's penis so badly that it fell off. Reconstructive surgery did not offer much hope at that time.

Enter a medical authoritarian, Dr. John Money, a well-known specialist at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. Surgeons in Dr. Money's Gender Identity Clinic reshaped the bodies of transsexual adults — men who wanted to look like women — and of hermaphrodites born with imperfect or ambiguous genitalia. Because surgical subtraction is easier than addition, they usually reshaped intersexual genitalia in feminine form and told the parents to raise the babies as girls.

Bruce Reimer's desperate parents got in touch with Dr. Money after seeing him on television. Following his advice, they opted for gender reassignment to turn Bruce into Brenda. The surgeons removed Bruce's testicles and sewed up his scrotum, planning to transform it into a pseudo-vagina in a later operation.

Dr. Money's previous research had been on intersexual children, who often had hormonal and chromosomal abnormalities in addition to their ambiguous genitalia. But he was eager to experiment on a normal child whose penis had been accidentally damaged. He regarded it as the ideal test case for his wider theory that gender resulted from social conditioning. Without any real evidence, he told the Reimers that Bruce would grow up perfectly well as Brenda if they would raise the child as a girl. He then reported the Bruce/Brenda experiment to the scientific world as definitive proof that gender was the product of social conditioning. Because ethical considerations required keeping the identity of the Reimer family secret, everyone had to take Dr. Money's word for it.

Enter a powerful but gullible social movement: second-wave feminism. Equality-seeking feminists had to believe that physical differences between the sexes were unimportant and that gender resulted from socialization in order to justify their political program of redefining sex roles in work and family. Hence feminists seized enthusiastically upon Dr. Money's report of his success in turning a boy into a girl.

Throughout the 1970s, sociology textbooks and feminist tracts proclaimed the news: Men and women are born with different sexual organs, but that hardly matters except for the mechanical aspects of reproduction. Society, acting through the state, can redefine gender roles.

Against this intellectual backdrop, it was not surprising that Dr. Money's protocols became standard in pediatric medicine, causing thousands of other boys with accidentally damaged penises to undergo castration and gender reassignment. But Bruce Reimer (now calling himself David to symbolize his struggle against the Goliath of medical hubris) has revealed that it was all a lie. He never felt like a girl, and he reverted to being a boy as soon as he was old enough to exercise any control over his life. Now he is married and acts as a father to his wife's three children, but can't have kids of his own.

David Reimer's story is inspiring because, against enormous odds, he managed to create something like a normal life for himself. But it should also be a warning of what can happen when authoritarian purveyors of untested scientific hypotheses, linking arms with zealous social reformers, offer to solve the problems of human life.

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