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Imposing Identity: Why States Should Restrict Infant Intersex Surgery

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IMPOSING IDENTITY: 
WHY STATES SHOULD RESTRICT 
INFANT INTERSEX SURGERY 

Laura Sundin*

ABSTRACT

Babies born with sex characteristics that do not “fit typical binary notions of male or female” are as common as babies born with red hair. These newborns may have one of many types of internal or external abnormalities, coined “intersex” conditions, such as having both an ovary and a testicle or having a large clitoris that resembles a penis. Despite their prevalence, the community of children with intersex conditions was stigmatized by prominent psychologists in the 1960s who theorized that to be “normal” the child must grow up with “unambiguous genitalia” and a binary gender identity.

This theory caused fear among the medical community. Pediatric surgeons even began referring to these children as “sexual freaks” who were “doomed to live in loneliness and frustration” unless surgically assigned a gender at birth. The societal mania of the 1960s led to current rigid patient care. Physicians commonly advise parents to subject their sexually variable newborns to medically unnecessary, irreversible surgery to conform “to a binary sex norm.” Last year alone, surgeons removed or reconstructed reproductive organs in approximately eight thousand newborns.

However, over eighty percent of the time when ambiguous genitals are evident, doctors choose to assign the baby as a female because it is an easier construct. This is shocking given research indicating that the adult later identifies as female less than fifty percent of the time. That adult is left with a lifetime of physical suffering—like “incontinence, scarring, [and] lack of sensation”—and emotional trauma from loss of bodily autonomy. Further, medical research shows these cosmetic surgeries are medically unnecessary—the child is not physically harmed by waiting to have gender assignment surgeries until the child can reasonably consent.

This Comment seeks to resolve the ethical dilemma of physicians’ freedom to impose their perception of normalcy over the nonconsenting patient’s best interests. It looks to recently proposed (yet rejected) California

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legislation calling for a temporary moratorium on intersex surgeries until the patient is six years old. The Comment suggests modifications to such legislation, based on medical practitioners’ concerns about maintaining individualized patient care. Ultimately, the Comment advocates for legislation protecting against intersex surgeries without the patient’s consent using legal arguments based on limiting parental authority; recent gender-identity related Supreme Court decisions; a comparison to female genital mutilation and nonconsensual sterilization; and a similarity to internationally denounced torture.

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I. INTRODUCTION

"It's a lot easier to see what's irrational in another culture than it is to see it in our own."¹

Becks is a fifteen-year-old with dark brown hair that falls well below her collarbone, traditionally feminine attributes like narrow shoulders and pronounced cheekbones, external genitalia that appear typically female,² and the label on her birth certificate that matches. Throughout her adolescence, Becks sketched comic book cartoons—the evidence of razor marks on her wrists visible to onlookers—and wondered aloud why she felt different from other girls in class.³ This outcasted, uncomfortable girl gained necessary clarity one fateful day. As previously scheduled, she was admitted on a Tuesday morning into Seattle Grace Hospital for surgery to remove a tumor that was resting on what the doctors assumed was her ovary.⁴ During the procedure, however, those doctors were surprised to discover that the ovary was, in fact, a testicle.⁵ Upon being told of the true ambiguous nature of her sexual organs, Becks understands that she can continue to associate as a female or instead embrace a male or gender-neutral identity.⁶ Powerfully, Becks takes scissors to her long hair, smiling because self-awareness is no longer as impossible as she once believed.⁷

This Seattle Grace Hospital patient is a realistic example of the 1.7% of the population⁸ who experts characterize as having an “intersex” condition—people “born with variations in their physical sex characteristics[ ] . . . [which] means an individual [is] born with . . . genitals, gonads, [or]

¹. Natalie Angier, New Debate Over Surgery on Genitals, N.Y. TIMES, May 13, 1997, at C8 (quoting Cheryl Chase, founder of the Intersex Society of North America, a San Francisco-based support group for adults born with ambiguous genitalia, as she discusses the similarities of female genital mutilation in Africa to clitoral reduction surgery on babies with intersex conditions in America).


³. See Grey’s Anatomy: Begin the Begin (Season Two, Episode Thirteen) (ABC television broadcast Jan. 15, 2006).

⁴. Id.

⁵. Id.

⁶. Id.

⁷. See id.

⁸. This statistic was discovered by an expert and biologist in the field of sexual identity development, Anne Fausto-Sterling, as a result of a study she conducted in conjunction with Brown University. Melanie Blackless et al., How Sexually Dimorphic Are We? Review and Synthesis, 12 Am. J. Hum. Biology 151, 161 (2000) (“Adding the estimates of all known causes of nondimorphic sexual development suggests that approximately 1.7% of all live births do not conform to a Platonic ideal of absolute sex chromosome, gonadal, genital, and hormonal dimorphism.”). This statistic has been accepted widely by most experts but challenged by others. See, e.g., Leonard Sax, How Common is Intersex? A Response to Anne Fausto-Sterling, 39 J. Sex Res. 174, 174 (2002); JULIE A. GREENBERG, INTERSEXUALITY AND THE LAW: WHY SEX MATTERS 2 (2012).
chromosome patterns that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies." This characterization is not rare; babies born with an intersex condition are as common as babies born with red hair. However, having an intersexual trait is highly misunderstood and stigmatized compared to that of having a specific hair color. As a result, not all individuals with intersex characteristics are given the opportunity that Becks was given—to claim a gender identity most fitting for them. Arguably, Becks only had this choice because doctors did not immediately recognize at birth that she possessed male sexual organs in addition to her female-typical vagina. Astonishingly, in approximately eight thousand newborns per year, doctors do instantly recognize reproductive abnormalities and surgically remove those which they believe will hinder the baby’s ability to fit societal notions of “normal.” Often, doctors’ decisions on which sexual organs to remove or reconstruct are based on non-life threatening considerations, like reconciling the baby’s physical appearance and external genitals.

The primary aim of this Comment is three-fold: (1) to educate readers on the current practice of performing operations on infants with intersex conditions without the patient’s own consent, and the (lack of) laws protecting against it; (2) to evaluate proposed state legislation denouncing such operations; and (3) to support a sweeping adoption of protective measures against such operations, based on a restriction of parental authority to make decisions that are not always in the child’s best interests, society’s evolving perceptions of intersex, the existence of laws banning genital mutilation and nonconsensual sterilization, and a comparison to internationally denounced torture.

To achieve the Comment’s aim, Part II proceeds by informing readers of the history of intersex surgeries still commonly performed on individuals at birth, with a focus on United States data. It will detail the various genital and gonadal conditions that constitute intersex, and it will present societal excuses for surgically correcting such conditions. It will also provide firsthand, traumatic accounts from adults who had such surgeries in infancy.


10. See Sax, supra note 8; Andrew L. Cunningham et al., Red for Danger? The Effects of Red Hair in Surgical Practice, 341 BRIT. MED. J. 1304, 1304 (2010) (“An estimated 1% to 2% of the general population worldwide has the phenotype for red hair.”).

11. This statistic equates to doctors assigning a gender of their choice to two out of every 1,000 live births. Blackless et al., supra note 8; See Kimberly Mascott Zieselman, I Was an Intersex Child Who Had Surgery. Don’t Put Other Kids Through This., USA TODAY (Aug. 10, 2017, 6:56 AM), https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2017/08/09/intersex-children-no-surgery-without-consent-zieselman-column/539853001/ [https://perma.cc/Q799-VV7M] (presenting a firsthand anecdote by the author who appeared externally female but was born with male-typical testes, which were removed in childhood on the advice of doctors and by the consent of her parents so that she could grow up as a “normal” girl).

12. See Zieselman, supra note 11.
Part III describes the absence of American laws banning medically unnecessary, genital-altering surgeries on babies. The Comment will detail groundbreaking California legislation that, if it had passed, would have been the first to disallow such surgeries without the patient’s consent.

Part IV responds to the medical community’s protests to surgical moratoriums in general. Part V will present arguments supporting passage of federal legislation with the same protective sentiment as that of the California bill. Part VI will explore multi-disciplinary modifications, and it will ultimately advocate for federal adoption of a legally mandated postponement of elective gender-assignment surgeries with such modifications.

II. BACKGROUND

A. RELEVANT TERMINOLOGY

Until recently, people referred to the community of individuals with intersex conditions exclusively as “hermaphrodites.” The term was popularized in the 1950s, but since the beginning of this century the term has been realized as misleading and frightening. It is considered by medical professionals, academics, and intersex advocates as offensive because the term suggests to people that someone has “two full sets of genitals and sex organs,” including both a penis and vagina, which “only exists in mythology.” The condition of hermaphroditism was finally replaced with the less misleading descriptor “intersex.” However, the longevity of “hermaphrodite” makes apparent that even the most socially conscious community can be slow to recognize that harshness fosters misconception; the most “progressive” sitcom of our generation, which “commit[s] to . . . gender identity diversity,” was still using the problematic term just fifteen years ago.

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13. “[American] laws do not specifically protect children against . . . [intersex] operations [without personal consent], but several areas of law prohibit conduct that could be interpreted to include” such operations. INTERACT & HUM. RTS. WATCH, “I WANT TO BE LIKE NATURE MADE ME”: MEDICALLY UNNECESSARY SURGERIES ON INTERSEX CHILDREN IN THE US 145 (2017), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/lgbtintersex0717_web_0.pdf [https://perma.cc/SJD5-B3MH].


17. See Ani Bundel, ‘Grey’s Anatomy’ Subverts the Patriarchy Every Thursday Night. And Viewers Are Loving It., NBC NEWS THINK: OPINION, ANALYSIS, ESSAYS (Feb. 9, 2018, 2:39 PM), https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/grey-s-anatomy-subverts-patriarchy-every-thursday-night-viewers-are-ncna846451 [https://perma.cc/6ZL2-LR46]; see Grey’s Anatomy: Begin the Begin, supra note 3 (airing in 2006, the episode referred to the intersex character Becks only by the term “hermaphrodite”).
Notably, in 2006, experts from the Lawson Wilkins Pediatric Endocrine Society coined the newest term, “Disorders of Sex Development” (DSD), which is sometimes used in academic articles and media as a synonym for intersex. However, the term DSD is met with pushback for implying a disability, and it is the least familiar term for describing the same ambiguous, atypical sexual conditions. Therefore, this Comment solely uses the term “intersex” to refer to ambiguous genital, gonadal, and chromosomal conditions. Some individuals with such conditions also choose to identify as intersex; however, this Comment does not assume that an intersex identity is fitting for all within this community. This Comment advocates for the opportunity to choose one’s own identity.

B. INTERSEX CONDITIONS

Numerous variations of atypical sexual organs are characterized as intersex. Broadly speaking, intersex variations are divided into four categories. A person in the first category is deemed “46, XX intersex” and has the XX chromosomes of a genetically typical woman yet has the external genitals of a typical male or has undeveloped internal female anatomy. Specifically, an otherwise-typical female patient with ovaries has a “larger than average clitoris” or the labia fused, both abnormalities resulting in what looks like a penis. Alternatively, the patient could have an “absent, misshapen, or small” uterus or “no cervix.” One of the most common genetically inherited conditions that causes “46, XX intersex” is congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH), where one of the two adrenal glands produces too much androgen, a male sex hormone. CAH causes “masculine-typical characteristics” to appear. When a mother takes male hormones such as testosterone or has a male hormone-producing ovarian tumor during pregnancy, male characteristics in an otherwise assumed-female baby may appear.

The second category—coined “46, XY intersex”—is a person with male-typical XY chromosomes but “external genitals [that] are incompletely formed, ambiguous, or clearly female.” Here, the patient may have been “born without a penis,” with a penis that is significantly smaller than normal, or with “testes [that] are small (about half [the] typi-

19. See id.
21. Id.
22. GREENBERG, supra note 8, at 1. The labia are the “folds of skin of the external female genitals.” Intersex, MEDLINEPLUS, supra note 20.
24. Id.
25. Id.
27. Id.
XY intersex is most commonly caused by Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS) (also called “testicular feminization”), a genetic defect in which a biologically male person is “resistant to male hormones” and as a result, physically female characteristics appear. Depending on the severity of AIS, it can result in the child looking like a girl, undescended testes, or an undeveloped penis, among other symptoms.

A person in the third category has either XX or XY chromosomes but has a combination of male and female gonads (sex glands), rather than just ovaries or just testes. The patient here, deemed “true gonadal intersex,” may have one ovary and one testes, or one of the gonads may contain both types of tissue (called an “ovotestes”). The cause of true gonadal intersex is unknown, but it “has been linked to exposure to common agricultural pesticides.”

An individual within the final category—deemed “complex or undetermined intersex”—has chromosome configurations other than typical XX or XY. The patient’s intersex character is not obvious because “there is [not a] discrepancy between internal and external genitalia.” Here, conditions include the person having XO chromosomes or having “either an [extra] X or a[n] [extra] Y” chromosome, resulting in abnormal hormone levels.

Some categorical abnormalities—like atypical chromosomal configurations—are subtler than others and are usually not discovered until adolescence or even adulthood. However, experts suggest that as many as two in every thousand babies are born with an abnormal variation that is so obvious that surgeons feel compelled to correct it immediately upon birth.

C. Performance of Corrective Surgeries

A surgery performed to correct or to “normalize” sex anatomy is commonly referred to as an “intersex surgery,” a “genital surgery,” and a...
“gender-normalizing”\textsuperscript{40} surgery, or a “gender assignment”\textsuperscript{41} surgery. The types of surgeries performed on minors with intersex traits are masculinizing and feminizing. Masculinizing surgical procedures are those performed to make one’s sexual anatomy more like that of a typical XY-male, while feminizing surgical procedures are performed on one to be reared as a typical XX-female.\textsuperscript{42}

The various types of feminizing surgeries include: a clitoridectomy, a labiaplasty, a vaginoplasty, and a gonadectomy (of the testes).\textsuperscript{43} A clitoridectomy is a procedure in which the pediatric surgeon “reduce[s] or remove[s] infant clitorises deemed abnormally large.”\textsuperscript{44} Such surgery is surprisingly common in the United States; it is performed on “2,000 babies a year.”\textsuperscript{45} For example, Ms. Coventry, whose “clitoris measured just over half an inch long, two or three times the average size,” but posed no medical risk and merely looked “boyish,” was operated on at the age of six at the request of her parents who were concerned of how a large clitoris “would affect [her] growing up.”\textsuperscript{46} In her own words, without her consent, the doctors “just snipped it right off,” which has led to an adulthood lacking in sexual stimulation.\textsuperscript{47} This nonconsensual genital mutilation is condemned in Part V of this Comment. A labiaplasty involves doctors reshaping or creating tissue surrounding the vagina when it is misshaped or missing.\textsuperscript{48} A vaginoplasty is performed “to create or deepen a vagina.”\textsuperscript{49} A feminizing gonadectomy involves removal of testes from a baby that is assigned as female.\textsuperscript{50}

The less commonly performed masculinizing surgeries include: an orchiopexy, a hysterectomy, a penile enlargement surgery, and a gonadectomy (of the ovaries).\textsuperscript{51} An orchiopexy is an operation per-


\textsuperscript{41} Intersex, LGBT MENTAL HEALTH SYLLABUS, supra note 18.


\textsuperscript{44} Angier, supra note 1.

\textsuperscript{45} Id.

\textsuperscript{46} Id.

\textsuperscript{47} See id.

\textsuperscript{48} Feminizing Genitoplasty, supra note 43.

\textsuperscript{49} Uprimny, supra note 43.

\textsuperscript{50} Frequently Asked Questions, supra note 23.

formed to treat a child with undescended testes by moving the undescended testicle from the stomach “into the scrotum and permanently fix it there.”52 A hysterectomy removes part or all of a uterus (a female reproductive organ used to house a fetus prior to birth) and can also include removing the cervix.53 Penile enlargement surgery inserts silicone under the patient’s penis skin to make the penis longer and wider.54 Gonadectomies are more commonly performed when doctors have assigned the female gender and remove present testes.55 However, if a male gender is instead assigned, the surgery removes the baby’s ovaries.56

The statistics are staggering: essentially, 12% of people with intersex conditions are assigned a gender by immediate, post-birth feminizing or masculinizing surgery; this means that unlike Becks, twenty-one babies per day are unable to consent to their own identity.57 A doctor’s performance of such a “normalizing” surgery can, and too often does, result in the doctor surgically assigning a gender that is different from the gender the person chooses to identify with in adulthood.58 The consequences felt by victims of such surgeries include physical suffering like “incontinence, scarring, [and] lack of sensation,”59 and emotional trauma like “post-traumatic stress disorder, problems with intimacy and severe depression.”60

In general, surgeons and other medical practitioners are undecided on how to best protect their young intersex patients; this is due in large part to the scarce amount of data that exists in directing physicians’ actions.61 The United States does not mandate reports on surgical procedures and their outcomes, so the “most reliable sources” are incomplete, voluntary reports by physicians and patients.62 These voluntary studies “are used by practitioners in advising parents” of children with intersex conditions.63 However, the relevant studies do not even address whether the patient was given the option to opt out of surgery nor do they include the patients’ opinions on their lives “had they not been operated on.”64 Additionally, the scarce data that does exist is mainly firsthand accounts of rage and depression due to the patients’ gender dysphoria or loss of sex-cost [https://perma.cc/ZT7N-KAFA] (last updated Feb. 28, 2019); Andres Calvo et al., Laparoscopic Approach for Gonadectomy in Pediatric Patients With Intersex Disorders, 5 TRANSLATIONAL PEDIATRICS 295, 299 (2016).

52. Orchiopexy, supra note 51.
53. Hysterectomy, supra note 51.
54. Penis Enlargement Surgery, supra note 51.
55. Frequently Asked Questions, supra note 23.
56. Calvo et al., supra note 51, at 298.
57. See, e.g., Blackless et al., supra note 8, at 151, 161.
58. interACT & Hum. RTS. WATCH, supra note 13, at 152.
59. US: Harmful Surgery on Intersex Children, supra note 39 (noting that “[o]perations to alter the size or appearance of children’s genitals” pose such physical risks).
60. interACT & Hum. RTS. WATCH, supra note 13, at 152 (referencing anecdotes from “generations of intersex adults” dealing with such emotional trauma).
61. See id. at 50–51.
62. Id.; see Elaine M. Burns et al., Understanding the Strengths and Weaknesses of Public Reporting of Surgeon-Specific Outcome Data, 35 Health Aff. 415, 415 (2016).
63. interACT & Hum. RTS. WATCH, supra note 13, at 50–51.
64. Id.
ual function from involuntary youth surgeries, as well as accounts of shame from delayed knowledge of such person-altering interventions. However, these anecdotes are largely unrefuted by science due to the fact that for the past fifty years, surgical correction of ambiguous genitalia has been “shrouded in shame and secrecy,” so there was no medical follow-up.

Admittedly, some of these surgical interventions are “medically necessary,” such as repairing the child’s internal bladder that is exposed or removing abnormal gonadal structures that are high risk for malignancy. The current controversy, however, lies in whether surgeons should be able to perform “risky and medically unnecessary[,] often purely[,] cosmetic[,] surgeries on intersex children . . . before they are even able to talk.”

D. American Social and Medical Culture Surrounding the Decision to Perform Unnecessary Intersex Surgeries

American culture is obsessed with the idea that “there are only two sexes” despite the biological fact that humans are born with non-exclusively male or female sex anatomy as often as they are born with red hair. Infant gender-assignment surgeries became popular in the mid-1900s after American psychologist and sexologist John Money published an extensive study, the results of which he coined his Sex Assignment Theory. The premise of his theory was that in order for a child to have a “stable ‘normal’ gender identity,” the child must grow up with “unambiguous genitalia and unequivocal assurance from parents as to the[ir] chosen gender.” Money concluded that “correction of ambiguous genital appearance” is necessary for the child’s psychological health.

The shock-factor of such a radical and one-sided study, the subject of which was previously unspoken, accentuated Money’s Sex Assignment Theory.

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65. See Greenberg, supra note 8, at 27 (detailing a true story about Cheryl, whose parents consented to operation on her at eighteen months that removed her phallus in order to conform her genitalia to that of a “feminine” girl). “By nineteen, she was filled with rage and had suicidal thoughts.” Id.

66. Id. at 17.


68. US: Harmful Surgery on Intersex Children, supra note 39, at 3 (emphasis added).


70. See Beh & Diamond, supra note 15, at 14.


73. Children born with intersex conditions.
Theory in the late 1950s.\textsuperscript{74} The increasing popularity of the theory—that genital ambiguity harms a child’s health—resulted in fear among the medical community.\textsuperscript{75} Doctors (especially pediatric doctors) pervasively began using harsh and hysterical language, even publicly referring to a baby with intersex conditions as a “hopeless psychologic misfit doomed to live always as a sexual freak in loneliness and frustration” unless assigned a gender at birth.\textsuperscript{76} Understandably, this domino effect led to societal mania in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{77} That time period began the ever-existing “state of rigid uniformity”\textsuperscript{78}: physicians commonly advise parents to subject their babies to surgery to conform ambiguous sexual organs to “a binary sex norm.”\textsuperscript{79} Existing pressure from this state is illustrated by a 2004 study. Eighty-nine percent of parents consented to genital surgery on their intersex child’s behalf, the motivation being “the potential for a more natural genital appearance” for the child’s social wellbeing.\textsuperscript{80}

The pressure on parents to subject their gender-ambiguous infants to surgery has persisted for over sixty years, despite the lack of research indicating positive outcomes of such procedures or that the doctor assigns the right gender even half of the time.\textsuperscript{81} In fact, American custom is to assign children with intersex conditions as female by removing extra tissue.\textsuperscript{82} Shockingly, more than eighty percent of the time that ambiguous genitalia are evident, doctors assign the baby as a female by performing one of the feminizing procedures detailed above.\textsuperscript{83} However, nowhere near eighty percent of all babies with intersex conditions choose to iden-

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{74} Beh & Diamond, supra note 15, at 15.
\textsuperscript{76} Doctors Dewhurst and Gordon published their opinion that a child’s gender being in doubt is a “tragic event” which will “conjure up [in the child] visions of [that] hopeless psychologic misfit.” Id. (emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{77} Beh & Diamond, supra note 15, at 15 (emphasizing parents’ resulting belief in the need to assign a child’s gender immediately after birth); Fausto-Sterling, supra note 69.
\textsuperscript{78} Fausto-Sterling, supra note 69.
\textsuperscript{79} Greenberg, supra note 8, at 21.
\textsuperscript{80} Jennifer E. Dayner et al., Medical Treatment of Intersex: Parental Perspectives, 172 J. UROLOGY 1762, 1762–63 (2004) (a study of parents to intersex children ages eighteen months to thirteen years). “A common goal of medically unnecessary surgeries on intersex children who are too young to consent is to help them conform to gender and sexual norms and expectations, thereby easing psycho-social stresses through childhood and adolescence.” interACT & HUM. RTS. WATCH, supra note 13, at 94.
\textsuperscript{81} interACT & HUM. RTS. WATCH, supra note 13, at 108 (“[T]here remains no research showing that early, medically unnecessary genital surgery is helpful to the intersex child[,] nor is there data to predict gender identity outcomes with confidence in many intersex conditions—meaning that doctors are sometimes conducting sex assignment surgeries that the children will later reject. . . . [D]octors give parents information about gender identity, surgical risks, and the reversibility of certain procedures that have no basis in medical literature.”).
\textsuperscript{82} Catherine L. Minto et al., The Effect of Clitoral Surgery on Sexual Outcome in Individuals Who Have Intersex Conditions, 361 LANCET 1252 (2003).
\textsuperscript{83} Reiner, supra note 42, at 550–51 (analyzing a study in which 82% of adults with intersex conditions had been surgically assigned female, but only 31% declared female as their gender).
\end{footnotesize}
tify as female adults. Studies show\textsuperscript{84} that not even eighty percent of the typically female XX-chromosome infant patients—who are subject to male-hormone producing genetic disorders like CAH—later identify as females. Doctors commonly operate in a way to conform babies’ genitalia to that of a typical female solely because it is easier for them to construct or to keep a cosmetically attractive vagina and clitoris intact.\textsuperscript{85} Thus, doctors’ decisions are not based on legitimate support such as increased health risks associated with masculinizing surgeries or on statistical data indicating overwhelming patient preference for a female identity; the decision is purely based on appearance and ease.\textsuperscript{86}

Although doctors believe that individuals with intersex traits “may be exposed to an increased risk of gonadal cancer over time,” there is sparse evidence of actual cancer rates or even of cancer risks for “specific intersex conditions.”\textsuperscript{87} Additionally, physicians who tried to discover evidence that having atypical genitalia leads to psychological distress were unable to find any.\textsuperscript{88} In fact, there is only one documented suicide resulting from “uncorrected” intersex conditions, that of Abel Barbin in 1860, and that suicide is detailed by experts as the result of society’s ostracizing reaction to his admission of genital ambiguity (not from his own detestation of such features).\textsuperscript{89} Relatedly, physicians advocating for sexual normalizing surgeries point to transgender youth’s suicide rates, which is misguided. Transgender suicide is typically “driven by . . . discrimination and harassment . . . [and] ill-treatment by doctors—not by whether their genitals match their gender identity.”\textsuperscript{90}

Therefore, the pervasive hysteria surrounding abnormal genitals coupled with little medical evidence supporting cosmetic surgeries’ necessity leads to a reasonable conclusion that cancer and psychological risks are pretexts for doctors imposing on children their idea of normalcy. “Normalcy” is not a valid reason for altering children’s anatomy—and ultimately, identity—without their consent.

\textsuperscript{84} Id.; See Vickie Pasterski et al., Increased Cross-Gender Identification Independent of Gender Role Behavior in Girls with Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia: Results from a Standardized Assessment of 4- to 11-Year-Old Children, 44 Archives Sexual Behavior 1363 (2015) (analyzing the gender self-identification of forty-three girls and thirty-eight boys with CAH all aged four to eleven years).
\textsuperscript{85} Intersex, supra note 18.
\textsuperscript{86} See id.
\textsuperscript{87} INTERACT & HUM. RTS. WATCH, supra note 13, at 95.
\textsuperscript{89} See Alice Domurat Dreger, Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex 19 (rev. ed. 2009).
\textsuperscript{90} See Russell B. Toomer et al., Transgender Adolescent Suicide Behavior, 142 Pediatrics 1 (2018); Kyle Knight, If a Doctor Tells a Parent That Surgery Could Prevent Their Child’s Suicide, It’s Not True, HUFFPOST (Sept. 11, 2017, 1:30 AM), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/if-a-doctor-tells-a-parent-that-surgery-could-prevent_b_59af2445e4b0e50640cd62a [https://perma.cc/UFG9-4EHK].
E. EMOTIONAL TRAUMA AND PHYSICAL AILMENTS CALL FOR LESS PERMANENT, NON-SURGICAL MEASURES

Current pediatric surgical practice is still based on the dated understanding that “one’s sexual identity is so entwined with the appearance of one’s genitals that it is worth subjecting infants to a major operation to assure visual concordance between one and the other.”91 Not only are these unnecessary intersex surgeries imposed on infants for illegitimate reasons, the irreversible results are often emotionally and physically harmful.92 In fact, these surgeries that are premised on preventing future psychological damage—from being slightly different than others—generally result in that very harm. For example, an individual subjected to intersex surgeries in childhood later lamented as an adult, “All of these exams on my body as a kid sent a strong message that I was freakish[,] and that I had something wrong with me that had to do with my sex.”93 Another—whose enlarged clitoris was trimmed as an infant—is considered a “success stor[y]” because she “still ha[s] clitoral sensation[,] and [is] orgasmic” even though she said that “it’s taken [her] whole life to come to terms with [her] body and not to feel such terrible shame” due to the procedure.94

Further negative repercussions include lack of sexual pleasure. A research study conducted by Dr. Catherine Minto indicated that feminizing surgery (specifically, clitoridectomies) could negatively affect a patient’s “sexual function—frequency of intercourse, degree of satisfaction, avoidance, sensuality, vaginal penetration, and orgasm.”95 For example, forty-year-old Ms. Chase had her enlarged clitoris removed as a young child as “treatment” for her intersex condition; as a result of the procedure, she “has no clitoral sensation, has never had an orgasm and is still bitter about the loss.”96 Minto’s study questioned thirty-nine adults with ambiguous genitalia, eighteen of whose clitorises had been trimmed or removed at birth97: “Every one of the 18 women who had undergone clitoral surgery had higher rates of non-sensuality—a lack of enjoyment in being caressed and in caressing their partner’s body—than those who didn’t have surgery; 39% of those who had clitoral surgery were unable to achieve orgasm.”98

Additional harmful outcomes include a lifetime of necessary hormone replacement therapy and irreversible gender assignments. Gonadectomies (removal of the ovaries or the testes) can amount to sterilization—

91. Angier, supra note 1.
92. US: Harmful Surgery on Intersex Children, supra note 39 (“[E]vidence does show that the [cosmetic] surgery itself can cause severe and irreversible physical harm and emotional distress”).
93. INTERACT & HUM. RTS. WATCH, supra note 13, at 67 (quoting Interview by Human Rights Watch with Theresa N., Cal. (Oct. 26, 2016)).
94. Angier, supra note 1 (emphasis added).
95. Minto, supra note 82, at 1253.
96. Angier, supra note 1.
97. Minto, supra note 82, at 1253.
98. Id.
making the patient unable to produce offspring—"without the patient’s consent." On top of potential infertility, the procedures also “require lifelong hormone replacement therapy [HRT]." The most common types of HRTs include ingesting tablets of progesterone and estrogen but can also include hormonal creams and patches. These therapies are necessary after gonadectomies are performed on pre-pubescent children in order to later induce puberty; in turn, puberty aids in developing the child’s brain function and in developing the child’s features such as breasts, facial hair, and deepness of voice. These therapies do not end once puberty is induced. The child will have to undergo these therapies for the remainder of his or her life to ensure full sexual development and to prevent physical symptoms like hot flashes. The risks of long-term hormone consumption is still highly unknown, but research studies indicate that “the risk of breast cancer is now thought to rise if HRT is used for over 5 years,” which is the case for most intersex individuals. Lastly, other general repercussions of “[o]perations to alter the size or appearance of children’s genitals” include “incontinence, scarring,” severance of nerves which can never regrow, and “scar tissue [which] can limit options for future surgery.”

Conversely, not all patients who were operated on as infants have necessarily experienced more negative than positive side effects. It is impossible for us to definitively argue as such, due to the lack of research. The fact is, however, that there are known harmful side effects from non-consensual gender-assignment surgeries while there is no scientific basis to support that the supposed positive psychological benefits outweigh those risks. On the other hand, without such surgery, the child “can be raised as either [or neither] sex” without health complications. To counter any potential psychological damage on the child, non-irreversible

100. Id.
102. Lucia Lanciotti et al., Different Clinical Presentations and Management in Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (CAIS), 16 INT’L J. ENVTL. RES. & PUB. HEALTH 1268 (2019).
103. See id.
104. See US: Harmful Surgery on Intersex Children, supra note 39; Brazier, supra note 101; Lanciotti et al., supra note 102; Angier, supra note 1.
alternative treatments can be offered, like psychological treatment. The reasonable treatment of intersex conditions, therefore, seems to be reversible options that allow the child to determine for itself if and when irreversible gender assignment is fitting.

III. THE AMERICAN LEGISLATIVE FIGHT FOR INTERSEX AUTONOMY

American “laws do not specifically protect [intersex] children” against medical procedures that are forced on them without “free or informed consent.” Several areas of American law, such as those regulating sterilization and female genital mutilation, do “prohibit conduct that could be interpreted to include medically unnecessary intersex surgeries,” but they have never been enforced in that context.

The intersex community’s first (failed) fight for bodily autonomy occurred in the Texas, Indiana, and Nevada legislatures. Before the vehicle of this Comment was proposed, those states attempted to pass legislation related to intersex surgical prohibition. In 2017, the Texas Legislature introduced Senate Bill 1342, which prohibited non-medically necessary intersex surgeries on foster children younger than twelve years old without a court order declaring the procedure to be “in child’s best interests.” The bill failed in committee before even going to a vote. There have been no further efforts in Texas to protect children from intersex surgeries. In 2019, “[Texas] legislators decided to pass a law protecting Texans from e-cigarettes until they reach the age of 21 . . . [but] [t]hey left children able to be sterilized and mutilated [at birth].”

Similarly, Indiana’s 2017 House Bill 1461 also proposed to outlaw intersex surgeries on minors in foster care and also failed before receiving a hearing. Nevada’s Senate Bill 408 was more protective, in that it prohibited physicians from performing “anatomical sex” assignment on children without their assent unless “delaying the procedure [was] likely to endanger” the child. However, it has still left ambiguous discretion for parents and physicians. It died in the Senate’s Committee on Health and

110. INTERACT & HUM. RTS. WATCH, supra note 13, at 145 (referencing the 2016 US Department of State statement issued on Intersex Awareness Day, which acknowledged that American intersex children are still unprotected by law and are commonly subject to forced procedures that “jeopardize their physical integrity and ability to live free”).
111. Id. (emphasis added).
112. California’s broad moratorium on intersex surgeries.
114. Id.
115. Id.
Then, on January 28, 2019, California Democratic Senator Scott Wiener authored and introduced California Senate Bill 201, a complete ban on doctors’ performance of medically unnecessary treatments on variations in sex characteristics without the individual’s informed consent. As initially introduced, the bill did not define the age of consent. Instead, it generally outlawed such surgery unless the child born with intersex conditions could agree to the operation after “a physician and surgeon . . . [provided] a written and oral disclosure” of the operation’s purpose and effects. After criticism for not drawing such a line, on January 6, 2020, Wiener chose six years to be the legal floor at which time doctors could even attempt such procedures. He reasoned that “a 6 year[ ] old is old enough to express feelings so that a parent can make a more informed choice for the child.” In its current state, the short yet sweeping California Senate Bill 201 prohibits “treatment or intervention on the sex characteristics” of an individual “who is under 6 years of age unless the treatment or intervention is medically necessary.” It requires the Medical Board of California to consult with entities like the State Department of Public Health in order to publicly clarify “medically necessary” procedures before December 1, 2021.

On January 13, 2020, the current bill was voted on by the California Senate’s Business, Professions and Economic Development Committee. It failed with four senators’ (one Republican and three Democrats) no votes and three senators’ (one Republican and two Democrats) abstention, despite two Democratic senators’ yes votes. Although California Senate Bill 201 is a partisan Democrat bill, some of its own party supporters voted against it only because it “requires some narrowing.”

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121. Id.
122. Id. (quoting the bill’s January 31, 2019 version, prior to both the March 2019 and January 2020 amendments).
123. See Cal. S.B. 201 § 2295(c)(1) (analyzing the January 6, 2020 version of California Senate Bill 201).
125. Cal. S.B. 201 (emphasis added).
126. Id.
127. Id. (noting that the bill required a majority vote of yes to become law).
This argument is similar yet slighter than the medical community’s general opposition to a ban on intersex surgeries, detailed below.

If the bill passed, California would have been the first state to mandate patient decision-making before the performance of feminizing or masculinizing intersex procedures. Wiener plans to continue this fight for intersex patient participation during California’s next legislative session because “[a]s with many civil rights struggles, it sometimes takes multiple tries to prevail.”

IV. RESPONDING TO THE MEDICAL COMMUNITY’S OPPOSITION TO A MORATORIUM ON INTERSEX SURGERIES

The California Medical Association (CMA), the most vocal opponent to California Senate Bill 201, is “opposed to legislating the practice of medicine” in general due to the complex nature of individual care. The CMA specifically opposes California Senate Bill 201 for its oversimplicity and unclearly defined “medically necessary” exception. Further, the association argues that the “emotional health and future of the patient” is jeopardized by the bill because it creates other risks such as the patient’s family rejecting the child’s abnormalities. The Societies for Pediatric Urology also opposes the bill because it restricts families from considering “all viable [treatment] options” for their infants with intersex conditions.

Physicians typically prefer a more case-specific, individualized approach to medical care. A strong advocate of individualized care who vehemently opposes any legal interference in medical practice is bioethicist Claudia Wiesemann. She argues that patient autonomy is actually lost with postponed informed consent. For example, a child with AIS will, at puberty, face the “effects of male-typical pubertal development.” To avoid these affects, hormone therapy must start at a younger age. Thus, physicians believe that postponing gender-assignment surgeries until the patient is old enough to consent (as California Senate Bill 201 proposes) “closes an important window of opportunity for the child.”

The CMA similarly argues that a total postponement of surgery is not appropriate

130. Neus, supra note 129.
132. Id.
133. Id.
134. Id.
136. Id. at 673.
137. Id.
138. Id.
139. Id.
because there are still risks involved in waiting, and “clinical evidence for the methods of risk assessment at this stage are still inconclusive.” 140

However, these autonomy arguments by Wiesemann and the CMA imply that physicians’ assignments of gender prior to puberty likely have more positive than negative long-term, irreversible effects. But those arguments don’t acknowledge the fact that “benefits of early surgical intervention are unproven at best.” 141 On the other hand, negative irreversible repercussions of early, nonconsensual operations are plenty. 142 Finally, California Senate Bill 201’s ban is only enforced until the patient is six years old, which is typically well before puberty begins and is an age at which even Wiesemann admits people can start to make informed decisions. 143

V. SUPPORT FOR LEGISLATION PROTECTING AGAINST STANDARDS OF IRREVERSIBLE CARE

“The [primary] goal of the intersex-rights movement is literally the right to exist.” 144

As discussed, intersex surgeries’ popularity surged in the 1960s at a time when Americans were first learning about intersex characteristics but refusing to openly discuss them. 145 Society stigmatized the conditions and, out of fear, parents began consenting to “normalizing” surgeries on their gender-nonconforming children. 146 Consequently, such hysteria silenced parents and their intersex children from discussing their real experiences (in either having forced operations or foregoing them) to avoid ostracization. 147 Since that era, surgeries on babies with intersex conditions have become the standard protocol—albeit a risky, lazy, and unfair one—out of a perceived need to create for the child a binary, “normal” identity. 148

However, because a practice was considered acceptable in the past does not necessarily mean we should idly stand by it today. 149 There is

140. Bajko, supra note 131.
141. Lowry, supra note 67, at 332; see Milton Diamond & Jameson Garland, Evidence Regarding Cosmetic and Medically Unnecessary Surgery on Infants, 10 J. PEDIATRIC UROLOGY 2, 4 (2013) (indicating that “[t]here is no evidence at this time that either early surgery or late surgery better preserves sexual function” (alteration in original)).
142. See supra Part II.E.
143. Wiesemann, supra note 135, at 674.
146. Id. at 15.
147. Id. at 24.
148. See id. at 25.
149. Consider, for example, the history of nonconsensual human experimentation, like American doctors in the 1940s who infected prisoners with malaria to test anti-malaria drugs; such “atrocities” is considered ubiquitously unethical now but was common practice at one time. Nina Amramova, Unethical Experiments’ Painful Contributions to Today’s
little reason to condone forced sex-assignment operations in light of a newer and better understanding of their negative repercussions and the ability to live with sexual abnormalities without health risks. Today, there is a prevalence of openly intersex community members acknowledging their nonconforming reproductive traits. Intersex advocacy and education groups, which were unheard of in the 1960s, now exist. There is an accessible dialogue—which did not exist fifty years ago—from adults who were subjected to binary-identity imposing surgeries as children. Our evolving awareness demands protection against these uninformed, emotion-driven, and nonconsensual operations on children, and our laws should not allow physicians to cater to an unaccepting society.

A. Limited Parental Authority is Appropriate in the Intersex Surgical Context

“While an adult . . . is quite free to submit [one]self to a ritual or tradition, a child has no formed judgment and does not consent, but simply undergoes the operation while . . . totally vulnerable.”

Narrow parental authority is appropriate in the intersex surgical context because surrogate medical decision-making can reasonably be read narrowly under the Family Code, federal courts have suggested limitations, legislative resisters agree with restricted discretion, and the risk of harm is too great to leave in the hands of impressionable parents. If a competent patient does not consent to surgery, then the medical intervention amounts to illegal battery. However, state statutes grant parental authority to consent to medical decisions on behalf of their child. Specifically, family codes like those in Texas grant parental right to consent for “medical care” and “surgical treatment.” Even a textual interpretation leads to an understanding that medical “care” or “treatment” imply parents’ decisional discretion is appropriate only when it involves a dysfunction that necessarily needs to be corrected for the child’s health.


150. Today, it is not presumed that the intersex individual will be isolated as a “sexual freak.” See Dewhurst & Gordon, supra note 75.

151. See Zieselman, supra note 11.

152. See id.

153. See id.

154. Rejecting the CMA’s argument that the “‘emotional health and future of the patient’ is jeopardized by [a moratorium] because it creates . . . risks such as the patient’s family rejecting the child’s abnormalities.” Supra text accompanying note 133.


156. Wiesemann et al., supra note 135, at 673.

157. See Tex. Fam. Code Ann. § 151.00(6) (West 2001) (noting that parents have the right to consent to their minor child’s medical care).

158. Id.

As noted, these cosmetic intersex surgeries are not aimed at improving the child’s health; thus, parents’ authority should at the least not be granted freely.160

Although the United States Supreme Court has acknowledged the “traditional presumption that the parents act in the best interests of their child,” the Court did observe that “parents cannot always have absolute and unreviewable discretion” to make life-altering decisions for their child.161 Additionally, the Court has never held that the right of the parent to make decisions regarding childcare is “fundamental”—but it has held as unconstitutional the absolute decision-making power of parents over minors for some medical treatments, such as abortion.162 The CMA would surely counter that a parent’s decision to allow genitalia-altering operations on his or her child is made only after review and informed advice by physicians.163 However, the Court has very significantly precludes parents’ substantial decision-making roles in the instance of resulting “abuse.”164 Although the Court has not yet addressed the abusive nature of intersex surgeries, it is clear from intra-comment research that such surgeries lead to permanent, severe ailments.165

In fact, the Supreme Court did explicitly find nonconsensual removal of a prisoner’s reproductive organs to be abusive.166 Further, a federal court condemned as “abusive” a father imposing his own “cure” to his son’s “girlie” and “queer” behavior by calling the son “faggot” in order to reverse such inherent behavior.167 According to the Court, subjecting a child to mistreatment because the parent is “embarrass[ed]” by the child is not acceptable in the home;168 undoubtedly, mistreatment for those same reasons should not be acceptable in an operating room either. Therefore, the Supreme Court would likely hold intersex surgeries to be abusive, thus negating the argument for parental right to consent to a child’s unnecessary operation.

Notably, legal-moratorium opposer and bioethicist Claudia Wiesemann, who believes that parents should take a “major” decision-making role in intersexual medical management, also believes that par-

160. See supra Part II.
163. See supra Part IV.
164. See Parham, 442 U.S. at 604.
165. Supra Part II (discussing the negative repercussions like irreversible removal of reproductive capability, physical pain, lack of sexual stimulation, and emotional trauma).
168. Id.
ents’ discretion should be limited.169 Because children are “able to understand biological processes . . . [and] reflect on their identity” by the young age of six,170 the child is arguably able to—and should—be involved in sexual developmental decisions.

Finally, the power that our society places in parents’ hands can be dangerous because “parental reaction [does not] always dictate[ ] the proper, or the best, treatment of infants.”171 The decisions that parents should be able to decide for babies could be its own paper topic. However, it is worth considering two timely topics in which parents have been understood to abuse their discretion: vaccinations and conversion therapy. Adults’ vulnerability in the face of a global pandemic reflects babies’ vulnerability in the face of their parents’ choice not to vaccinate them. The parents’ choice not to vaccinate, like the choice to modify organs, leaves the child at risk to irreversible ailments.172 But it is especially dangerous for traditionally trusted doctors to give parents the advice to “correct” sexual abnormalities when parents are at their most anxious—immediately after childbirth.173

Legislators who wish to “enhance the rights of people with an intersex condition” share the same goal as those working on behalf of the LGBTQ+ community—to “eliminat[e] harmful practices based on sex and gender stereotypes.”174 Therefore, it is especially relevant that twenty states so far have adopted “conversion therapy laws,” which prohibit medical practitioners like psychiatrists from subjecting LGBTQ+ minors to harmful conversion therapy practices that attempt to change their sexual orientation or gender identity.175 These twenty states, including California, but not Texas, disallow parents from forcing children to undergo such therapy.176 These states recognize that harms like “depression, anxiety and self-destructive behavior”—which real conversion therapy patients have related—are not worth the risk, which remains by allowing parents that discretion.177 As detailed throughout this Comment, similar psychological risks remain when parents have the authority to consent to surgeries to “normalize” children’s gender identity.178 As experts at the highly respected, nonpartisan Hastings Center declared,

169. See Wiesemann et al., supra note 135, at 674.
170. Id.
172. See Jean Gough, Saying No to Vaccines is Risking a Child’s Life, UNICEF (Apr. 25, 2019), https://www.unicef.org/rosa/stories/saying-no-vaccines-risking-childrens-life [https://perma.cc/K2UR-T7VF] (children whose parents “reject routine vaccinations” are suffering from “deadly outbreaks of diseases that could have been prevented, like measles”).
173. See supra Part II.A.
176. LGBT Policy Spotlight, supra note 175.
177. Id.
178. Supra Part II.
“surgical expediency [to normalize the appearance of genitalia] could [likely] never outweigh the psychosocial and ethical arguments for waiting until . . . children reach the age at which they can meaningfully participate in the decision.”

Ultimately, in the cases of infants with intersex conditions, their parents are granted full discretionary power in deciding whether the physician can operate. Since courts have not limited parental authority in the intersex context yet condemn parental abuse, and legislators have recognized the need to protect children from other gender-identity altering therapies, legislators should also necessarily initiate protection for intersex newborns against the scalpel.

**B. EVOLVING KNOWLEDGE WARRANTS SIMILARLY EVOLVING LAW**

The federal court system has been a public forum for expressing the evolution of societal perceptions. In the 1960s, not only were intersex conditions taboo but so were gay, lesbian, and bisexual sexual orientations. However, in 2015, the United States Supreme Court made a ruling that propelled America out of that outdated perception. The Court in *Obergefell* legalized same-sex marriage, rejecting the outdated societal belief that “normal” marriage is between a man and a woman and recognizing all couples’ right to marry. Five years later (to the month), the Supreme Court, in a landmark decision, continued on the trajectory of equality for all sexual orientations and gender identities. In *Bostock*, the Court addressed the issue of whether firing an employee “simply for being homosexual or transgender” constitutes discrimination “on the basis of sex” under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Court ruled that it does. The resonance of this case lies in the majority’s arguably pragmatic approach to the reading of the word “sex”: Justice Gorsuch acknowledged that “[t]hose who adopted the Civil Rights Act might not have anticipated their work would lead to this particular result. . . . But the limits of the drafters’ imagination supply no reason to ignore the law’s demands.” In 1964, homosexuality and nonbinary gender identity and gender-expansive identity were almost invisible, and therefore, Congress surely did not take it into consideration in lawmaking. However, Congress’s lack of knowledge on sexual orientation and gender identity at the time of enactment should not dictate the Court’s statutory interpretation in a modern society where we have a clearer understanding of sex-

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179. *Greeneberg*, *supra* note 8, at 22.
182. *Id.* at 2607–08.
184. *Id.* at 1737.
185. *Id.*
186. *Id.*
187. *See id.*
ual minorities.188 Years ago, the Court would not have understood, as the majority did here, that “[s]ex play[ed] a necessary . . . role in the [adverse employment] decision[s]” because “[a]n employer who fires an individual for being homosexual or transgender fires that person for traits or actions it would not have questioned in members of a different sex.”189

The Court’s decision in Bostock is significant not only for showing an evolved understanding of sexual traits but also for aligning with the protection of intersex conditions, which are those that take the form of nonbinary gender identity. Analogously, federal courts are now specifically adopting a new understanding of intersexuality into law. In 2018, United States District Court Judge Jackson for the District of Colorado declared irrational a law that required an American citizen to identify as either male or female on one’s passport.190 The court recognized that citizens with intersex conditions exist and should not be forced to choose a binary identity that doesn’t correspond neatly to their physical attributes or emotional beliefs.191 Thus, the law now allows citizens to instead indicate nonbinary gender identity (by marking “X”) on their passport.192 Federal courts have now acknowledged necessary protections for multiple sexual orientations and gender identities, which history disregarded. We need to reject the outdated idea that a “normal” upbringing requires strict, immutable male or female anatomy and identity, and recognize individuals’ right to exist as whatever gender (or nongender) they wish.

C. Laws Prohibiting Nonconsensual Sterilization and Genital Mutilation Already Exist

Current American laws prohibiting sterilization and female genital mutilation (FGM) do not specifically address medically unnecessary intersex surgeries but could be interpreted as holding them unlawful. Nonconsensual sterilization was once common in the United States, but since 1942, it has been considered, in some circumstances, as an unlawful Constitutional violation of one’s “fundamental right to reproductive freedom.”193 Bolstering the Supreme Court’s support for minors’ bodily autonomy, it more recently emphasized that “[c]onstitutional rights [such as those relating to reproduction] do not . . . come into being magically only when one attains the state-defined age of majority.”194 Opponents of intersex surgical bans could argue that the more recent Supreme Court case, Stump v. Sparkman, allows those who intentionally sterilize minors with-

188. See id.
189. Id.
191. Id.
192. Id.
193. INTERACT & HUM. RTS. WATCH, supra note 13, at 146; Skinner v. Oklahoma ex rel. Williamson, 316 U.S. 535, 541 (1942) (holding that “sterilization . . . is [a] cruel and unusual punishment and violative of the Fourteenth Amendment”).
194. Planned Parenthood of Cent. Mo. v. Danforth, 428 U.S. 52, 74 (1976) (holding that a parent cannot decide whether the minor child will terminate or maintain her pregnancy—that decision is to be made by the pregnant minor).
out their consent to go unscathed. 195 However, that controversial case is distinguishable because it explicitly granted a judge—who allowed doctors to sterilize minors without their consent—legal immunity. 196 The case did not comment on the constitutionality of the actual act of nonconsensual sterilization. 197 In typical cases of nonconsensual intersex surgeries, the doctors are making the final determination to operate only after speaking exclusively with the child’s parents; judges are not the final decision makers and thus Stump is not relevant.

The removal of both ovaries or both testes, which is common in a gender-assigning gonadectomy, severely impairs the individual’s fertility. 198 Thus, intersex procedures are easily comparable to nonconsensual sterilization. However, the comparison is not as clear to all doctors, who sometimes conceptualize sterilizing procedures differently when performed on children with intersex conditions. 199 First, doctors sometimes do not equate “reproductive capacity” with “fertility” if the child’s assigned sex does not typically allow for “th[at] mode of potential reproduction” (for example, an assigned male having reproductive-necessary female ovaries). 200 Second, doctors sometimes don’t characterize a procedure as sterilization “if its primary purpose is something other than terminating reproductive capacity.” 201 Scientifically, though, the surgeries—whether deemed sterilizing or gender-conforming—all sever one’s ability to procreate. Thus, gonadectomies necessarily must be deferred until consent is possible.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) includes “all [nonconsensual] procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.” 202 These procedures are identical to some feminizing intersex surgeries. 203 A federal law, 204 as well as twenty-five state laws resembling it, criminalize FGM. 205 The federal law does not mention surgeries performed for the purpose of assigning a female gender to those with intersex conditions; North Dakota and Wisconsin’s laws, on the other hand, egregiously “exempt from their FGM statutes any procedure intended to ‘correct an ana-

196. Id. at 359–60.
197. See id.
199. INTERACT & HUM. RTS. WATCH, supra note 13, at 5–6.
200. Id. at 146.
201. Id. (emphasis added).
202. INTERACT & HUM. RTS. WATCH, supra note 13, at 149 (quoting the World Health Organization, which defines four classifications of FGM: (1) “the partial or total removal of the clitoris,” (2) also removing the labia, (3) “the narrowing of the vaginal orifice with the creation of a seal that is formed by cutting and then stitching the labia[s],” and (4) all other harmful female genitalia procedures including “pricking, piercing, incising, scraping, and cauterization”).
203. Supra Part II.
205. See INTERACT & HUM. RTS. WATCH, supra note 13, at 150.
tomical abnormality’”); and Oklahoma counterintuitively allows prohibited procedures as long as they are “necessary” for cosmetic purposes. However, modifying the current federal FGM law by allowing only such surgeries for conditions that pose a physical health risk would eliminate all doctors’ ability to perform feminizing clitoral reduction surgeries without the child’s consent. This modification would not excuse doctors who premise their surgeries on preventing “psychological and mental trauma for the child.” This excuse used by American pediatric surgeons is not wholly different from the excuse used by doctors in other countries like Somalia, Sudan, and Egypt, which universally encourage the removal of young females’ clitorises. The accepted practice also responds to communal attitudes, which illustrates the dangers of societal perceptions.

Based on the nuances, prevalent runarounds, and nonconformity in the intersex context regarding current sterilization and FGM laws, there needs to be a more protective solution for children with intersex conditions. Thus, broad legislation should be adopted to end both types of surgeries—those that prohibit one’s ability to reproduce and those that cut off genitalia based on perceived social necessity—unless the patient consents.

D. INTERSEX SURGERIES ARE AKIN TO TORTURE

The United Nations (UN) is an international organization made up of 193 member countries—including the United States—whose mission is to maintain international peace and protect human rights. In its 2013 Special Report on Torture (UN Report), the UN first recognized abuses on marginalized groups in the healthcare setting as potentially torturous. The report noted that medical operations “that cause[,] severe suffering for no [legitimate medical purpose]” are considered “cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment.” When a country allows such operations and the doctor specifically intends its results, the criteria for “torture” are met.

206. Id.
207. See 18 U.S.C. § 116 (stating that genital surgery is not violative if it is “necessary to the health of the person on whom it is performed”).
208. Angier, supra note 1, at 5.
209. Nancy Ehrenreich & Mark Barr, Intersex Surgery, Female Genital Cutting, and the Selective Condemnation of “Cultural Practices”, 40 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 71, 115 (2005) (noting the practice is generally accepted in those countries based on the premise “that women who fail to undergo genital surgery will be seen as dirty, promiscuous, and unmarriageable”).
210. Ehrenreich & Barr, supra note 209, at 115 (noting that with female genital cutting in both Africa and in the U.S., “practitioners are responding to very real societal attitudes that can . . . be expected to negatively affect the individuals in question”).
213. Id. at ¶ 39.
214. See id.
In its report, the UN specifically addressed physicians’ treatment of children’s “atypical sex characteristics” with involuntary and irreversible procedures like sex assignment, sterilization, and “genital normalizing surgery.” This inclusion implies that internationally, such medically unnecessary procedures on young intersex patients are denounced as torturous.

Further, it can be argued that the United States Supreme Court has held punishments that involve torturous treatment to be an unconstitutional violation of the Eighth Amendment, which states that “cruel and unusual punishments [shall not be] inflicted.” The United States also has a federal statute outlawing torture (called the “Torture Act”), but it has been interpreted as only applying in military context.

A European judge observed that “America’s idea of what is torture . . . does not appear to coincide with that of most civili[z]ed nations.” The American government has been criticized as inhumane for allowing intentional maltreatment of prisoners at medical bases and for not explicitly banning degrading treatment of human beings in the medical setting. Nevertheless, intersex procedures as described in the UN Report are comparable to torture due to the lack of consent by patients; their “permanent, irreversible,” and painful results, such as infertility and “severe mental suffering”; the United States’ acquiescence of intersex surgeries; and surgeons’ specific intention of performing them merely to “fix” the child’s gender. Thus, American laws need to formally recognize inhumane treatment by physicians in hospitals, just as they have recognized inhumane treatment by military and government officials in prisons.

215. Id. at ¶ 77.
216. U.S. CONST. amend VIII; In re Kemmler, 136 U.S. 436, 447 (1890) (“Punishments are cruel when they involve torture or a lingering death . . . .”).
221. See INTERACT & HUM. RTS. WATCH, supra note 13, at 139 (noting that “[t]he US in the only UN member state that has not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the primary [international] instrument . . . that elaborates the rights of children[,]” nor has the US “condemned surgery on intersex children” like nine other countries have).
222. See id. (emphasis added).
VI. THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD ADOPT PROTECTIVE INTERSEX LEGISLATION, MODIFIED BASED ON EXISTING OPPOSITION

“Real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time.”

To make a complex and contentious topic simple, physicians’ Hippocratic Oath says to “do no harm,” but research does not tell us that conducting feminizing and masculinizing surgeries on infants “does no harm.” If all physicians took an ethical and multidimensional approach to intersex patient care like bioethicist Claudia Wiesemann suggests, or if there was already a workable solution to ensure her standards were upheld, there would likely be no need for this commentary begging for protection of infants with variable sex characteristics. There is clearly a need to protect young patients from physicians who prioritize perceived normalcy and convenient operations over the patient’s autonomy. A sweeping moratorium on intersex surgeries in early childhood is a reasonable protective solution. However, a ban accompanied by only one page of text and a lack of supplemental resources is admittedly not sufficient to address the complexity of balancing parental authority with the protection of the child’s decision-making rights and bodily autonomy.

The introduction of California Senate Bill 201 highlights the momentum for a legal ban from correcting minors’ sexual abnormalities and indicates that “legislative reform [can be] a viable long-term strategy for protecting intersex infants.” Although difficult, the United States should outlaw surgical procedures on intersex patients in early childhood while also incorporating aspects of the multidisciplinary patient-care approach favored by bioethicists and medical practitioners.

Bioethicist Wiesemann rejects a legalized moratorium on early intersex procedures due to the negative effect that it can have on familial relations. She does, however, demand solutions to the stigmatizations that “arise due to the lack of a social environment in which children with [intersex traits] can experience their ‘otherness’ as normal.” To thrive,
“[a]ll youth require the support and acceptance of their . . . communities.”233 Thus, the government needs to acknowledge that gender is not binary but instead lies on a spectrum.234 To do so, all federal forms like passport applications and birth certificates should include an additional gender option, such as “nonbinary” or “neither of the above.”235 This initiative implies that the government recognizes nothing inherently wrong with choosing not to identify in a binary fashion. As a result, it may instill a sense of normalcy and mitigate the current issue of most ambiguous-genitalia bearing individuals choosing not to self-identify as “intersex” or of feeling shame for their irregularities.236 Additionally, once society begins widely recognizing the common occurrence of intersex conditions, parents may be more willing to embrace their young child’s intersex traits until the child is old enough to decide its own identity.

Additionally, Wiesemann suggests that intersex health care is most effective when it is not two-dimensional—solely decided between the surgeon and the patient’s parents—but rather invites additional medical disciplines to lend expertise.237 According to Wiesemann, “to strengthen the ability of parents to cope with the situation and to support their child[,] . . . parents have to receive professional support and assistance.”238 As such, the law should require psychologists to be actively involved in the process of informing parents of their child’s intersex condition. They should immediately engage with parents by informing them of the prevalence of intersex conditions, and empirical data on the harm that youth surgeries could ultimately cause. This will ease parents’ anxiety by showing them that their child is not as different as they likely believe, and they are not harming the child more than helping by waiting on surgical gender assignment.

A final major criticism by the CMA is the broad use of the term “medically necessary” in the exception to California Senate Bill 201’s ban.239 To mitigate this issue, before proposing federal legislation, the government needs to work with medical associations to narrowly define exactly which reproductive organ-altering surgeries are deemed “necessary.”

Ultimately, the federal government should protect one’s autonomy to choose one’s identity. Thus, it must adopt legislation which bans noncon-

234. See Fausto-Sterling, supra note 69.
235. See Zzyym v. Pompeo, 341 F. Supp. 3d 1248, 1261 (D. Colo. 2018) (holding that requiring passport applicants to choose either a “male” or “female” gender is irrational).
236. See Ann P. Haas et al., Suicide Attempts Among Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Adults, WILLIAMS INST. 1, 6 (Jan. 2014), https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/AFSP-Williams-Suicide-Report-Final.pdf [https://perma.cc/6KX5-2NRK] (reporting that only 6% of people with the medically defined identity of “intersex” strongly self-identified with that label, while 79% did not at all).
237. See Wiesemann et al., supra note 135, at 675.
238. See id.
239. Bajko, supra note 131.
sensual intersex procedures in early childhood, eliminates necessary bi-
nary self-identification on federal documents, requires a multidisciplinary
approach which incorporates psychological patient and family care, and
defines with precision those “medically necessary” exceptions to the ban.