

Human Rights Watch

Children's Rights

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/29/us-hospital-stop-harmful-intersex-surgeries-children>

Campaign and Advocacy

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Hospital is First Institution to Make This Change and Apologize for Harm Done

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In a victory for intersex people, a hospital in Chicago pledged earlier this year to stop performing medically unnecessary surgeries on children born with intersex traits. The Ann & Robert H. Lurie Childrens Hospital also [became the first hospital in the United States](#) to publicly apologize for the harm these surgeries caused intersex people, who are born with traits that don't fit conventional expectations of female or male bodies.

Convincing surgeons to acknowledge and apologize for the harm of these surgeries and to stop the operations has been the main priority of the US intersex movement since it organized in the early 1990s. This is the first time it has happened at an institutional level. We hope other hospitals and doctors will be inspired by this change and follow suit, and there is some evidence that they are. In October, Boston Childrens Hospital issued a similar pledge to stop certain procedures.

An estimated 1.7 percent of the population are intersex, meaning their sex characteristics, such as chromosomes, gonads, or genitals, may differ from social expectations of male and female bodies. These variations are almost invariably medically benign. Yet since the 1960s surgeons in the US have routinely performed cosmetic surgeries on children too young to give consent some were only two years old. The surgeries changed childrens bodies to fit a binary definition of male or female.

There is no evidence that such operations help children fit in or function in society, which some surgeons say is their aim. The operations do, however, carry high risks of scarring, loss of sexual sensation, incontinence, sterilization, and psychological trauma.

Human Rights Watch published its first report on the consequences of these medically unnecessary surgeries in June of 2017, working closely with consultant Dr. Suegee Tamar-Mattis, who is intersex, a physician, and a parent, as well as with our partner organization, interACT Advocates for Intersex Youth. Along with the report, Human Rights Watch produced [a video](#), featuring a Chicago intersex activist, Pidgeon Pagonis. In October of 2017, we published [another report](#), focusing on the discomfort of US medical providers with the continued use of these surgeries.

Since then, Human Rights Watch has called out surgeons for scaring parents of intersex children into wanting the surgeries, and we have presented our findings at medical schools, bar associations, and medical conferences across the US. We also testified at American Medical Association committee meetings and engaged the American Academy of Pediatrics to urge them to pass a nationwide policy.

Momentum is growing. The American Academy of Family Physicians, the North American Society for Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology, the Massachusetts Medical Society, and GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ Equality now all have policies supporting a delay of medically unnecessary surgeries until intersex people can consent to the procedures themselves.

Human Rights Watch is dedicated to continuing to document and advocate against these harmful surgeries, helping intersex children grow up healthy and whole.

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