

pg 6 (Living)

DAILY NATION  
Wednesday November 12, 2008**LIVING POSITIVELY****Circumcision and 'freedom'**

Despite research findings, I continue to drum it into my son's head that he must exercise wisdom in his relationships lest he end up like me

**M**y son Peter was circumcised three years ago and I still remember the agonising moments I endured before he "faced the knife". For starters, he had never gone for an HIV test. I gave birth to him in the days when programmes such as prevention-of-mother-to-child-transmission of HIV hadn't hit the scene. In fact, back then I was told Peter wouldn't live to see his first birthday.

Fast forward to his teen years, and I wanted him to undergo this rite of passage. However, I had one small problem. Okay, it was huge enough to give me sleepless nights.

"Should I take Peter to have a test first?" I asking myself over and over, as my mind saw-sawed between one answer and the next.

I knew my ABCs. I knew that facing the knife meant blood had to be spilled. And I knew that sometimes accidents happen, and transmission of HIV can occur even in an operating theatre setting. That's why in HIV-speak there is what is known as post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). In layman's terms, PEP means taking anti-retroviral drugs as soon as possible after exposure to HIV, so that the exposure does not result in infection.

**Tested negative**

After pussyfooting for what seemed like an eternity, I finally gathered the courage and took Peter for a test. I couldn't go on living in the dark. Thank God, he tested negative.

I was reminded of this experience some weeks ago, when there was a fuss about circumcision vis-à-vis HIV. This virus has confronted us with a health challenge like has never been witnessed in modern times, and our reaction has been to grasp at anything that shows even a glimmer of hope.

In preparation for circumcision, Peter was taken through the paces by his uncles and other older relatives who told him about the new responsibilities that lay ahead of him.

Through this, and with the coming of age celebrations that are part of our culture, they made sure my son understood how much things had changed following 'the cut'. He was still my son, but my community now regarded him as an adult, even though he wasn't 18 years old yet.

I only wish the same thing would happen today; that the people who are queuing to be circumcised would be counselled and taught basic things concerning HIV.

How many people understand what's really going on? Some may wrongly believe that circumcision is HIV's silver bullet. It's not: This misinformed lot thinks that after a visit to the nearest clinic, followed by the three-

week recuperation period, they can sleep around happily ever after. In fact, this would be tantamount to crossing a dark busy highway at night with your eyes cockily closed just because you're wearing a reflective jacket!

"After I'm circumcised, I can't catch it," I heard one young man saying during a TV interview; you would think HIV was the flu and he'd just got the flu shot.

"This guy is tempting fate," I said to no one in particular as I changed the channel.

Even today, I sit down with my son and remind him of his responsibilities. Just like his uncles and mentors did when he underwent this rite of passage, I let him know that there are things circumcision does, and there are things it doesn't.

I let him know that it would be the height of folly to push his luck just because researchers have findings showing that those who are circumcised stand a certain chance of not being infected when they have unprotected sex. If I don't level with him, he will get lost in the heat and excitement of new-found 'freedom' and experimentation.

I've been there. And done that. I know what a little 'freedom' can do, especially if there are no mentors to prod one in the right direction. I'm not about to curtail Peter's freedom, but if no one else is willing to give him the ABCs, I will go the full hog and give him everything, all the way up to the XYZs. I know that boys will always be boys, and Peter won't lug me around everywhere he goes. But, like all mothers, I hope my words will echo in his ears whenever he's about to make a tough decision.

The government may have good intentions, and may even come up with good programmes to boot. But as a parent with a wealth of knowledge when it comes to HIV, I have no excuse for sweeping the responsibility of HIV education under the carpet. Unfortunately, that's what most of us do, forgetting that the authorities can do only so much.

Legally, Peter is now an adult. Still, three things haven't changed. One, I'm still his mum. Two, I love him to bits. And three, I'm going to keep telling him what I tell any young person who cares to listen: an HIV-free generation is very possible, but only if our children learn from our stories and avoid making the mistakes we made. [asuntawagura@hotmail.com](mailto:asuntawagura@hotmail.com)

**This is the diary of Asunta Wagura, a mother of two who tested positive 20 years ago. She is the executive director of the Kenya Network of Women with Aids (KENWA).**