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¶ Not Just Africa: Female Circumcision Even Happens in U.S.
¶ Eds: Moved in advance for Sunday, Nov. 3, and thereafter
¶ By LISA M. HAMM
¶ Associated Press Writer
¶ With PM-NY--Mutilated Model
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¶ NEW YORK (AP) _ Genital cutting isn't confined to Africa and Asia _ it's also happening in the United States, to girls in immigrant communities that consider the practice a rite of passage.
¶ "When people migrate they don't give up their beliefs or their culture," said Asha Samad, a women's studies professor at the City University of New York and director of the Somali Association for Relief and Development.
¶ Although it's impossible to determine the magnitude of the practice here because it's done underground, thousands of Somali, Ethiopian, Eritrean and Sudanese refugees have come to this country in recent years, fleeing civil war and famine.
¶ The Centers for Disease Control, using data on how much circumcision is practiced in immigrants' homelands and making assumptions about sex and age, estimates that about 270,000 females in the United States were circumcised in their home country or are at risk here.
¶ Mimi Ramsey, an Ethiopian-born activist living in San Jose, Calif., estimates that 10,000 to 13,000 girls in America are at risk of "castration."
¶ The 43-year-old former nurse, who suffers chronic pain from her own childhood circumcision, recounted stories of a father who took his 5-year-old daughter into a bedroom, turned up the stereo to drown out her screams and circumcised her with a carving knife; of girls who went to visit Africa and came home cut; of men who told her they will circumcise their daughters no matter what because they don't want them to "jump from man to man" like American women.
¶ "We've heard of cases where circumcisers are brought to this country to perform circumcision on more than one girl," said Jessica Neuwirth of New York-based Equality Now, an international organization that works to protect women's rights.
¶ Congress outlawed female circumcision on Sept. 30, capping a two-year effort spearheaded by Rep. Pat Schroeder, D-Colo. The law, which takes effect March 29, will make it a crime to circumcise or remove any part of the genitalia of a girl under 18, except for medical reasons. The penalty is up to five years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000 for individuals or \$500,000 for organizations such as hospitals.
¶ Attorney Surita Sandosham, executive director of Equality Now, said the law would apply even if a child were taken out of the country to undergo the procedure.
¶ As a precursor to the new federal law, Congress passed a bill in April requiring the Immigration and Naturalization Service to inform new arrivals of U.S. laws against genital cutting. It also mandated that the Department of Health and Human Services educate immigrants on the health consequences of the practice and educate medical professionals about treating circumcised women.
¶ Dr. Carol Horowitz first encountered such women while working in a Seattle clinic for Somali refugees, where she handled a myriad of delayed gynecological and obstetrical complications.
¶ Horowitz, now a researcher at Mount Sinai Hospital's Department of Health and Policy in New York, cautioned that immigrant communities and women who have undergone the ritual must be treated with sensitivity and respect, not judgment.

¶ "We have a clash in values: our values and our patient's values," she said. "And we need to learn how to resolve these, for our sake and our patients' sake."

¶ Harborview Medical Center in Seattle has come under fire recently for its efforts to accommodate Somali immigrants who asked doctors to perform one of the least severe forms of circumcision on their daughters. The hospital has asked the state attorney general's office to examine whether performing a minor bloodletting would violate the new federal law.

¶ With the activist Ramsey at the forefront of the fight, California on Sept. 23 implemented a law making female genital circumcision a crime. Ramsey is a founder of Forward USA, a sister to the London-based Forward International group, which fights the practice.

¶ Legislation also has passed in Minnesota and North Dakota, and is being considered in several other states.

¶ New York Assemblywoman Barbara Clark has been working for three years to outlaw the practice. The state medical society wants to make sure the law's language doesn't interfere with the physician's ability to perform medically necessary procedures, according to legislative associate Pat Clancy.

¶ Clark acknowledged that people's traditions should be respected.

¶ "But if they're inhumane," she said, "we ought to be willing to say: This can't happen here."