

Sex Change Surgery Value Questioned

Transsexuals Who Do Without It Can
Also Adjust, Hopkins Study Finds

BY BILL STALL
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BALTIMORE—Transsexuals who undergo sex-change operations do not necessarily live happier or more successful lives than those who do not, according to a study conducted by a Johns Hopkins Hospital psychiatrist.

Partly as a result of the study, the hospital has stopped conducting such operations, and the future of transsexual surgery is being reassessed by a hospital committee.

John Hopkins created something of a sensation in 1965 by becoming the first American hospital to lend official support to transsexual surgery with the creation of a "gender identity clinic." More than 100 transsexuals—men who desire to be women and vice versa—have come to the hospital and four to six a year have been recommended for surgery.

But the study by Dr. Jon K. Meyer indicates that "the simple passing of time," or psychotherapy, may help the transsexual patient just as much as an operation. Meyer concluded that transsexualism is a psychiatric problem stemming from childhood and cannot be cured medically.

The results of the study were published this week in the Archives of General Psychiatry. Meyer interviewed 50 persons for the study, 26 who underwent surgery and 24 who came to Johns Hopkins for surgery but rejected this choice.

Transsexuals who underwent sex-change operations have been studied in the past to determine how well the surgery works. But this was the first time such a study included transsexuals who had sought surgery but decided not to go through with it.

Meyer said that those who did without the surgery had adjusted just about as well as those who had it.

The study surveyed how well each group was doing in such areas as education, adjustment to marriage, social stability and job success.

What the results mean to the medical profession, Meyer said, is that doctors must much more seriously consider the potential value of sex-change operations before approving them.

"Physicians have to ask themselves if transsexual surgery is medically necessary," he said in a statement.

"To say that this type of surgery cures psychiatric disturbance is incorrect. The study shows that surgery serves as a palliative measure relieving some of the patient's symptoms of discomfort but not necessarily improving the individual's adjustment in life . . .

"Certainly there is an issue of self-determination here for the patient, but we as physicians have to ask ourselves if surgical intervention in the transsexual's quandary is medically or ethically appropriate."

There is a period of life, Meyer said, particularly between age 20 and 30, when transsexuals have an acute desire for surgery. Most are males who want to have their sexual and reproductive organs altered and replaced through "construction of opposite sex facsimiles."

"If that time passes without surgery, they lose the intensity of this desire and frequently go on to a fair life adjustment," Meyer said.

He concluded that transsexualism begins to occur early in life, usually between the ages of 5 months and 3 years. Typically, a transsexual will complain that he is "a woman trapped in a man's body," Meyer said.

He said, "Our approach at the Sexual Behavior Consultation Unit (of which Meyer is director) to a patient seeking sex reassignment is to recognize the strength of the patient's wish but to assist the patient in exploring his underlying reasons for wanting a sex change, should he or she wish to do so. During the exploration stage, we usually find that these patients have experienced extremely painful relationships from their earliest years."

Meyer said that "desires to identify with and assume the role of the opposite sex have been recognized since antiquity." The transsexual operation became well-known with Christine Jorgenson in 1953. The first such operation at Johns Hopkins was conducted in 1960. The most recent case to receive publicity was that of tennis player Renee Richards.

Transsexuals who now come to Johns Hopkins for an operation are being referred to Stanford University, the University of Virginia and Case-Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

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