

160 Gender Alterations Since 1968

# Sex Surgery at Chocho

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Twice monthly, a surgery room at San Mateo's Chocho Community Hospital is prepared for the arrival of Dr. Ronald R. Laub, a Stanford Medical Center plastic surgeon, who has a unique specialty.

He is one of only a few qualified surgeons who can and will alter the physical anatomy of one sex to match that of the other.

For the past eight years, the physician has worked at Chocho to surgically aid persons who suffer in many cases from long standing sexual identity crises: they relate physiologically and emotionally with their sexual opposites.

To date, Dr. Laub has successfully altered the sexual organs of about 160 males and females. In all cases the patients were enrolled in Stanford's famed Gender Dysphoria Clinic.

Although gender change counseling and pre-operative treatment are conducted at Stanford, all transsexual surgery is performed at Chocho. It has been done there since shortly after the inception of the gender change program in 1968.

Neither Dr. Laub nor his associate, Dr. Norman Fisk, a psychiatrist and gynecologist, agreed to be interviewed because of what their representatives called the controversial nature of their work.

But it was related by Dr. Howard Gurevitz, acting director of the County Health and Welfare Department, that Stanford representatives had requested surgery space at Chocho several months after the program was established.

Dr. Gurevitz recalls with some detail the circumstances under which the medical center made its request. At the time he was director of County Mental Health Services. Dr. Gurevitz participated in discussions with Stanford program intimates meeting with the Chocho executive committee.

"Stanford at the time (and I presume this is still the case) had a surgery space problem," Dr. Guevitz said, "so they came to us asking to schedule our rooms for plastic surgery."

They explained they had established a new program in gender change counseling and plastic transsexual surgery, he said.

"The reaction of the executive committee at the time, I remember was positive, but there was concern that if Chocho, as a public hospital, was to open its doors to such surgery, well-thought out procedures would have to be adopted," he said.

Because such surgery was relatively uncommon at the time, Dr. Gurevitz said the executive committee went to great lengths to determine if the results might be as effective as other more common operations.

"The committee," he added, "also wanted assurances from Stanford that the new program representatives would follow specific protocol in dealing with the affected departments at the hospital. It was decided that I (as director of Mental Health Service) and chief of surgery would receive and review all the psychiatric

reports of patients who were cleared to undergo the (sex change) operations."

The District Attorney's Office additionally evaluates all applications for surgery to assure that the county could not be challenged legally by a patient who is dissatisfied with the results of his or her operation.

The executive committee, said Dr. Gurevitz, insisted that patients pay all costs of Chocho hospitalization and that payment be made prior to the operation.

Transsexual surgery is not inexpensive. Nor is it a simple procedure which is performed on demand.

According to information supplied by the Stanford Medical Center News Department, patients who contact the program are subjected to an elaborate screening process. They must complete lengthy questionnaires on their family background, social problems and sexual experiences.

During interviews conducted by Dr. Laub, patients are quizzed to determine if they indeed are subject to transsexualism.

Dr. Laub refers all patients with serious emotional problems to psychiatrists. He refuses to operate on persons for whom surgery might be dangerous and on those whose body structure might make it hard for them to pass as a member of the opposite sex.

After being admitted to the program, patients immediately begin hormone treatments. Men are administered estrogen which softens the skin, redistributes fatty tissue to develop breasts and produces impotency.

Female patients are given androgen, which deepens their voices, brings on heavier and darker hair on their bodies and halts menstruation.

After two or three months, patients are required to begin dressing and acting like their sexual opposites. At least 18 months of role playing is required before surgery is scheduled. Dr. Gurevitz explained that patients admitted for surgery are those who after almost two years of counseling and treatment still ardently feel "very deeply that their physical gender was a serious mistake," and that their true identity is that of the opposite sex.

"These are people," he said, "who have had feelings usually since early childhood that their sex is confused. They have gone through extensive counseling without success and believe that surgery is absolutely necessary."

Most patients, Dr. Gurevitz related, "are responsible, intelligent people" with good jobs. They are people who possess the physical stability and financial resources to complete the program.

Dr. Laub, said the acting health chief, performs two operations per month at Chocho. The vast majority of operations are from male to female.

The operation involves removing the male organs and constructing through plastic surgical methods, female genitalia. Cost for the surgery is approximately \$1,500. Hospitalization costs amount to \$2,528.

Female to male operations are more complicated, requiring two-stage surgery. In the first stage, a double mastectomy is performed. Later, a hysterectomy is done along with construction of artificial male organs. The artificial penis is incapable of an erection.

Cost of the surgery is about \$3,000. Hospitalization cost is \$2,955.

Three outpatient visits to Chope are required after male to female surgery. Three to nine outpatient visits are required for female to male surgery.

If patients cannot show that an insurance company will pay all hospital costs, they are required, according to Dr. Gurevitz, to pay Chope by cashier's check or money order.

Transsexual surgery came to Chope at a time when the public hospital and Stanford Medical Center shared a solid working relationship. Chope operated for the university an intern and residency program. In 1968-69 there was a plastic surgeon in residence.

Today the residency and intern program has all but disappeared at Chope. The only residency is in dermatology. Yet gender change surgery continues.

Dr. Gurevitz praised the manner in which Stanford has abided by Chope procedures over the past eight years. He said there has never been a problem with patients or Stanford personnel and he asserted that as long as there is surgery space available at Chope, he would recommend that gender change surgery continue at the facility.

## Believing Their Gender Was A Serious Mistake

