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In US, debate roils over male circumcision

WASHINGTON: In the United States, a vocal movement of 'intactivists,' or people who oppose male circumcision, is engaged in a fierce debate with doctors over the practice of clipping baby boys' foreskins.

Actor Russell Crowe may be the most famous of them. Earlier this year he declared on Twitter: "Circumcision is barbaric and stupid," before swiftly tweeting sorry to anyone who thought he was 'mocking the rituals and traditions of others.'

Over the weekend, California's governor blocked a bid by opponents of circumcision to have voters decide if local governments could make it a crime for doctors to perform the procedure unless medically necessary.

But the movement has vowed to keep fighting against a medical practice that is done to about 57 per cent of American boys — down from more than 80 per cent in the 1980s according to US health authorities — yet remains rare in most of Europe, Asia and Latin America.

Defence of circumcision typically tends to come from Jews and Muslims who say it is part of their belief set, though opponents say religious circumcision actually makes up less than one per cent of all operations.

Increasingly, support for the practice has come from US doctors who warn of the potential risks of not doing it, including more likely cases of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV.

"Based on the medical evidence, banning infant male circumcision would deprive parents of the right to act on behalf of their children's

health," wrote Johns Hopkins University epidemiologists Aaron Tobian and Ronald Gray in Tuesday's *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

"Three randomised trials in Africa demonstrated that adult male circumcision decreases human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) acquisition in men by 51 per cent to 6 per cent," the pair wrote, also citing research that suggests lower rates of other sex diseases.

"If a vaccine were available that reduced HIV risk by 60 per cent, genital herpes risk by 3 per cent, and HR-HPV (high-risk human papillomaviruses) risk by 35 per cent, the medical community would rally behind the immunization and it would be promoted as a game-changing public health intervention."

The pair acknowledged concerns that some of the Africa studies may not be applicable to the United States, where sexually transmitted infections (STIs) 'are a persistent problem' despite high circumcision rates. — AFP

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Aaron Tobian and Ronald Gray, Johns Hopkins University epidemiologists

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COURTESY CALL: US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta (second left) meets with Egypt's military ruler Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi (centre) and Egyptian Prime Minister Essam Sharaf (right) at the Financial Authority House in Cairo. — AFP photo