

I've been **thinking**...



Circumcision, Starbucks and the Four Freedoms
November 2012

I've been thinking about circumcision, Starbucks, and FDR's four freedoms.

Well before Starbucks began roasting exotic blends, Yuban took a swing at it. Not sure they hit the ball out of the park, but they were getting more for a pound of coffee than number-one Folgers at checkout stands across America. Do you remember Yuban commercials during the 1960s? They concluded with that deep trained-for-television voice saying, "As John Arbuckle says, 'You get what you pay for.'"

A few months ago, I stumbled onto a healthcare invoice dated April 14, 1948, from Las Campanas Hospital in Compton, California (a cottage hospital where Judy Garland had been treated for addiction a few months earlier). It was for my birth totaling \$62.45 for three days of mother and



baby care! When I showed it to my dad, I said, "Looks like you got what you paid for."

For added perspective, though my mom and doc had a difficult time getting me through the tunnel, a C-section was not required. Forty-five cents for drugs sounds like a bargain to me. Five bucks for a circumcision seems high in 1948 dollars. Today, the average uncomplicated hospital delivery in Middle America (with an epidural) runs \$5K to \$7K. They ding you \$400 for circumcision!

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IN ACCOUNT WITH
LAS CAMPANAS HOSPITAL
 COMPTON, CALIFORNIA

LOS ANGELES NE. 6-1185 COMPTON NE. 1-114

5:00 AM

1948

April 14, to 17th

Care of OB patient and care of baby

for 3 days	51.00
Laboratory fee	5.00
Circumcision	5.00
Treatments	1.00
Drugs	.45
	<hr/> 62.45
	60.00
	\$ 2.45

PAID
 Paid APR 18 1948
 LW.
 LAS CAMPANAS HOSPITAL
 Balance due on Acct.

Back in the day, snipping was rarely challenged. These days, to circumcise or not to circumcise has become a heated question among parents of newborn boys. At 80 times what my peeps paid for the procedure, I imagine current pricing settles the issue for some.

However, a line item on a hospital bill is the least of most people's concerns. For billions in our world, circumcision is a religious expectation or commitment. At the same time, a vocal growing

minority in the U.S., Canada, and Europe are protesting the practice, which they claim is "genital mutilation." FDR's first freedom of speech comes to mind. I hate to admit it, but so does the Seinfeld episode in which a high-strung, nervous mohel, while performing a circumcision, cuts godparent Jerry's finger by mistake.

The World Health Organization says about one-third of men in the world are circumcised. Many are Muslims and Jews circumcised for religious reasons. However, the number is apparently increasing in underdeveloped countries where parents are choosing to circumcise their boys for health and hygiene reasons regardless of religious beliefs. There is [evidence](#) that the procedure may reduce the risk of AIDS.

Earlier this year, the city of Cologne's [decision](#) to make child circumcision a crime understandably incurred the wrath of Jewish and Islamic groups across Germany, whose faiths are rooted in Old Testament instruction that men be circumcised. Over 20,000 baby boys are circumcised on religious grounds each year in Germany. Apparently, the German government has listened and is poised to [introduce a law](#) that allows parents to choose whether or not their sons are circumcised.

As I write, Thanksgiving is around the corner, and Independence Hall is out my Philadelphia hotel window. This is a place and time Americans are more likely to ponder their freedoms, not the least of which is FDR's number two freedom of worship. I bumped into the roots of this freedom on a wall at the-must-visit American Jewish History Museum next door to my hotel. It was a line from Thomas Jefferson's 1786 bill that established religious freedom in Virginia, which stated "All men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, opinions in matters of religion...."

Seven years ago this month in a Winnipeg hospital, the identities of two baby boys on the same ward were mixed up, and a circumcision was performed on the wrong child. The family of the boy who was incorrectly circumcised had not decided whether or not to have the procedure done. Think they were upset? I'm pretty sure we're talking about an irreversible procedure. I'm also guessing this was not the first or last time the operation was performed on the wrong kid.

A first-time dad on my flight here from Seattle told me how much it meant to him and his wife that their newborn had a bar-coded ankle band, which nurses scanned to avoid misidentification and mistreatment. While bar-code point-of-care technology is not the only error-prevention practice (it would not have protected Seinfeld's

finger) it is a salient element. Scanning could have prevented the Canadian hospital from snipping the wrong kid. FDR's fourth freedom from fear seems like a good fit here.

Before I sign off, did you catch that \$2.45 shows due on my birth bill? So I asked. My dad doesn't know if he paid the balance. Let's say he didn't. At 5 percent interest, he currently owes \$62.21. Maybe I'm worth twice what he paid, and my value is increasing by the year. Sadly, the hospital went out of business in August of 1965 after it was burned down during the Watts' riots. So, I guess we'll never know.

I could use a Starbucks. Google Maps show ten within walking distance. Sounds like freedom from want to me.

What do you think?

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Neuenschwander'.

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