

Harbinger's column

Harbinger is York University's peer counselling and referral service. Drop in at 214 Vanier residence or phone 667-3059-3632. Open 10-6, Monday to Friday.

Vasectomy is safe, isn't same as castration

By DOUG RHODES

For a man who does not wish to have (more) children, sterilization offers one of the most effective and inexpensive forms of birth control available. After a very minor operation and a waiting period, there is no worry or further action necessary to avoid fathering a child.

The usual method of sterilization, vasectomy, should not be confused with castration. Castration is not done to healthy men. Removal of the testicles results in personality changes, since testicles produce important hormones involved in many functions of the body.

Vasectomy, on the other hand, merely involves blocking the flow

of sperm (which are still produced normally) to the prostate gland and thence to the penis. Since all parts of the sexual organs still function in their usual fashion, there is no change in the biological and physiological base of sexual feelings or performance. In fact, sperm make up only a small portion of the fluid ejaculated, so that

blocking the sperm will not noticeably lessen its volume.

What happens to the sperm which continue to be produced even after a vasectomy? They are absorbed into the bloodstream without discomfort, and removed from the body by normal, blood cleaning processes.

Most vasectomies are usually done in a doctor's office under local anaesthetic. They take about 20 or 30 minutes. The only discomfort comes when the "freezing" is injected. People who are nervous about this may be given a light sedative.

After administering the anaesthetic, the doctor makes a small incision on each side of the scrotum, exposing the vas deferens (the sperm tube from the testicle). A piece of the tube is cut out and the ends tied with absorbable surgical thread. The tube is then placed back in the scrotum, and the incision closed with absorbable sutures. A dressing is applied and the operation is over.

Afterwards, some discomfort is normal, but many men find they can return to work the same day or the next. There are a lot of blood vessels in the scrotum and sometimes there will be bruising and swelling around the incision. This usually disappears within a few days. Unpleasant side effects are very unusual, and normally an aspirin will relieve any discomfort.

Sterility is not effective immediately after the operation since sperm remain in the sperm ducts. Another form of birth control must be used until two or three sperm tests prove negative, usually a few weeks. Then there are no further worries about birth control, since vasectomy is regarded as permanent. There is research being done on reversible sterilization, but for now, vasectomy means not being able to father for the remainder of the man's life. Therefore, both the man and any long term partners must be sure they do not wish to have children naturally. Legally, only the man's consent is required for the operation, but some doctors ask that wives come in with the man for the first interview, or at least sign the consent form to show they have discussed the question together. Where it has been carefully thought out beforehand, vasectomy brings no psychological problems. In fact, many couples report an improvement in many areas of their relationship once they become unrestrained by fear of pregnancy or awkward birth control methods.

Single men can obtain a vasectomy, but should be prepared to justify their decision to the doctor, especially if they are under 25. This is really no hassle, since such an important decision should be carefully thought out anyway. If your own doctor resists your desire to be sterilized, make sure you discuss the reasons he or she has for disuading you. Family Planning Clinics and Information Centres in many cities will be able to refer you to doctors who are experienced in counselling men who request vasectomies. For married as well as single men, doctors are most concerned that the decision to have a vasectomy has been made in a careful and mature manner.

Some men have expressed interest in storing sperm in a sperm bank before having a vasectomy, so that they might be able to father a child later. This is not possible in Ontario now because of legal complications, but it is done in New York State. It is very expensive (one place charges \$600) and is not covered by health insurance.

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