



Intersex Article 7: Awareness

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Twenty years ago, very few people beyond the medical establishment and those directly affected were really aware of intersex people. Hermaphroditic figures existed in mythology and stories of the human oddities exhibited in Victorian freak shows persisted, but there was little understanding of intersex conditions as something which affect a significant number of people in the modern age. The parents of intersex children were encouraged to keep the condition secret, within a climate of shame, and some doctors even went so far as to erase medical records of the 'corrective' surgery which these children received.

Over the past two decades, intersex campaigning organisations have worked hard to dismantle this culture of secrecy. In the past few years, popular novels and television documentaries have succeeded in bringing intersex conditions to the attention of the general public. The public reaction has, for the most part, been very positive and very much in favour of supporting the right of intersex people to self determination.

Despite these changes, a significant number of intersex children are raised without being made aware of their own conditions. Many report feelings of distress and isolation which stem from being vaguely aware that there's something they're not being told. Many have a sense that they have somehow failed to be what their parents want. Surgery and other medical procedures can be particularly traumatic for children who are not fully certain what the procedures are for. These days, it is generally considered healthy to be open and honest with children when they have other medical complications such as heart defects or childhood cancers, but there is still a powerful stigma which can make people feel that the open discussion of intersex conditions is inappropriate. Some of this doubtless has to do with social taboos against talking about sex, although, for children, sex is not part of the issue.

Despite modern society's treatment of intersex conditions as a primarily medical phenomenon, there is still a lack of awareness about them within the medical establishment. This means that intersex people can have difficulty obtaining appropriate health services. They may also be reluctant to be open about their

circumstances with new doctors who have not read their notes, due to an expectation of prejudice, especially if they have not conformed to medical expectations by having their bodies altered.

Despite the fact that intersex children may need extra support from school staff, the subject of intersex conditions is never discussed within school curricula and most school counsellors have no training in how to deal with the special problems likely to be faced by intersex children. This means that intersex children often have no-one to talk to about their experiences apart from their parents and doctors, which increases the likelihood of them feeling pressured into accepting treatments which they don't really want. There is no support available within schools for children who wish to change gender roles. The UK government has stated that it does not believe this is an issue for children, an opinion which runs contrary to the documented experience of numerous intersex people who were assigned to the wrong gender role at birth.

2004 saw the first ever Intersex Awareness Day, on which intersex people across North America joined together to try and make governments and the public more aware of their existence and of the issues which they regularly have to face. The following year this was expanded into an international effort.

Intersex conditions affect approximately one in two hundred of the population, which means that there are over three hundred thousand intersex people in the UK alone, with over twenty seven thousand in Scotland. Intersex campaigning groups aim to ensure that these people receive proper representation, protection from discrimination, and equal access to public services.