Tonsillectomy and Circumcision: Comparisons of Two Cohorts

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Changes in the prevalence of tonsillectomy and circumcision in eleven year olds are described in two birth cohorts spaced 12 years apart. Both types of operation were less prevalent in the later (1958) cohort; tonsillectomy fell by a fifth and circumcision by more than half. These falls were confined to tonsillectomy before the age of six and circumcision under one year.

Social class differences in tonsillectomy were found in both cohort studies but the strong social class gradient in circumcision reported in the 1946 cohort had vanished in the 1958.

Regional and birth rank differences are found for both types of operation; these show substantial changes over time. These results are discussed in the context of changing professional opinions about the worth of these operations.

INTRODUCTION

This paper uses information gathered in two cohort studies — started in 1946 and in 1958 — to compare the prevalence of tonsillectomy and circumcision among children of 11 years. The 1946 study started at a time when informed criticisms of both these operations were beginning to appear. The 1958 study started after a period of twelve years of intense and continuing professional criticism. Our aim is to show the changes in the proportions of children who were circumcised or had their tonsils removed in Great Britain, in different regions of the country, in different occupational groups and in different types of family.

Both tonsillectomy and circumcision were common before the war. Glover (1) reported that in the period 1919–1937 the number of children at public elementary schools in England who had their tonsils removed rose from 42,000 to 84,000. Comparable figures for circumcision are not available, though Doll and Hadley (2) found that among males aged 15–65 circumcision was more frequent among the younger than among the older.

The evaluative studies so far published on tonsillectomy suggest that for children at ages between 5 and 7 there are some short-term benefits. For example in the 1946 cohort, removal of tonsils between the ages of 6 and 7 was accompanied by a substantial reduction in symptoms of upper respiratory infection and nasal obstruction. (3) There was, however, little evidence of long-term benefit in for example fewer absences from school.

The lack of even one well-planned clinical trial of tonsillectomy according to Venters and Bloor (4) justifies the lack of consensus that exists on the value of the operation, and this probably accounts for the widespread variations in the assessment of children as needing tonsillectomy. (5, 6) However, as Bloor (7) points out, even ear, nose and throat specialists who have a “common subscription to a corpus of scientific knowledge of ENT practice, phrased in general terms” show consistent variations in their routine assessments.

Circumcision is generally performed during the first few weeks of life when there is rarely any medical indication for the operation (8). In this country the value of circumcision was questioned by Gairdner (9) in 1949 and since then the medical profession has discouraged circumcision so that it is now an uncommon operation performed mainly for religious reasons or for specific medical indications. No substantial change in this attitude of disapproval has occurred in recent years (10), though Bolande (11) suggests that “little serious objection can actually be raised against (ritualistic) neonatal circumcision since its adverse effects seem miniscule”. Richards, Bernal and Brackbill (12),

however, suggest that circumcision may be associated with early behavioural changes in the child which could affect early parent–child interaction and have far reaching consequences for later development. We will return to this suggestion briefly at the end of this paper.

In the past both tonsillectomy and circumcision were more common among the ‘well-to-do’ (1, 9) and marked regional variations were also reported (1) for tonsillectomy. No satisfactory explanation has been given for these differences which may reflect variations in standards of medical assessment or in the value placed on the operation by different social groups and in different parts of the country.

**METHOD**

The two longitudinal studies that provide the data for this paper are the National Survey of Health and Development (1946 cohort) and the National Child Development Study (1958 cohort). The former grew out of a national study of the maternity services which covered 13,687 births in Great Britain during the first week of March 1946. A sub-group of 5,362 children from this cohort has been followed up at not less than 2 year intervals to the age of 27. Included in the sample are all children whose fathers were non-manual or agricultural workers and one quarter of the rest; all multiple or illegitimate births were excluded. The resulting excess of middle class and agricultural workers families makes a small difference in overall prevalence and in regional and birth rank differences for both circumcision and tonsillectomy. The original population can however be regained by multiplying by the reciprocal of the sampling fraction.

The 1958 cohort is a continuation of the perinatal survey which covered all children born in Great Britain in the first week of March of that year. These children have been followed up at 7, 11 and 16 years and the study which was originally launched by the National Birthday Trust Fund and the Royal College of Obstetricians (13). In order to make the two cohorts populations as similar as possible, multiple and illegitimate births were excluded. The resulting excess of middle class and agricultural workers families makes a small difference in overall prevalence and in regional and birth rank differences for both circumcision and tonsillectomy. The original population can however be regained by multiplying by the reciprocal of the sampling fraction.

The 1958 cohort information on both the removal of tonsils and circumcision came from the parents answers to questions at the 11 year follow-up.

It seems from the 1946 cohort data that the reports of parents on whether their children have had their tonsils removed is reliable. For example at 7 years the reports of both mothers and doctors were available for 4,134 children, 860 of whom had already lost their tonsils. There were only six reporting errors, all by doctors. It is by no means certain however, that the correct age of operation is obtained from the same source. Unfortunately, we have no means of testing this and we have to bear in mind in the subsequent discussion that the ages of tonsillectomy for the 1946 study are exact as they were obtained from hospital records, whereas in the 1958 cohort we relied on the mothers for the age of tonsillectomy and their answers will have been subject to errors of recall and possibly biased by current views on the operation (14). In both cohorts the age at circumcision involved some element of recall.

The 1946 and 1958 cohorts use a different method of occupational classification which mainly affects the non-manual working class group which has therefore not been sub-divided in the following analysis. The manual workers in both cohorts were classified according to skill, though the classification used in the 1946 cohort was based on the 1951 census and that in the 1958 cohort on the Registrar General's occupational classification published in 1966. It is, however, unlikely that the alterations in the definition of skill levels during this period were sufficient to distort the subsequent comparisons. A final problem of occupational classification was that the self-employed workers were coded as a separate group in the 1946 cohort but in the 1958 were assigned to occupational groups according to the nature of their work.
TABLE 1
Prevalence of Tonsillectomy: Birth to 11 years 1946 and 1958 Cohorts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tonsils Removed at Specified Age</th>
<th>Age 1946 cohort</th>
<th>Age 1958 cohort</th>
<th>Father's Occupation</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Birth Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Tonsils</td>
<td>&lt;4 yrs (130)</td>
<td>2.5* (97)</td>
<td>non-manual</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4-6 yrs (463)</td>
<td>9.8* (310)</td>
<td>skilled manual</td>
<td>Midlands</td>
<td>Second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6-8 yrs (397)</td>
<td>8.8* (224)</td>
<td>semiskilled manual</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Third</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8-11 yrs (199)</td>
<td>4.5* (111)</td>
<td>unskilled manual</td>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>Fourth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0-11 yrs (9916*)</td>
<td>25.7* (5120)</td>
<td>self-employed etc.</td>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>Fifth or higher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The data from the two studies are first shown separately and then combined and analysed jointly in a series of analyses of variance using the proportions who had lost their tonsils by 11 years and the proportions who had been circumcised by that age as the dependent variables in a log-linear model (see for example Bishop et al (15) for an account of this model). The independent variables consist of (a) "cohort effect", namely whether the individual belonged to the 1946 or the 1958 cohort (b) social group, (c) region, (d) birth rank. A further analysis tested the difference in age distribution between the studies after allowing for social class.

As already mentioned the 1946 cohort sample is stratified by social class and population estimates may be obtained by appropriate weighting. This has been done for many of the comparisons and the resulting figures have been starred (*). In the analysis of variance, social class is always one of the independent variables.

RESULTS

For the study on tonsillectomy the number of children in the 1946 cohort was 4,186 (population estimate 9,916*), and in the 1958 cohort 13,479. For the study of circumcision there were 2,072 (4,895*) boys in the 1946 cohort and 6,746 in the 1958.

TONSILLECTOMY

By 11 years 25.7% (27.4% in the unadjusted sample) of boys and girls born in 1946 had lost their tonsils compared with 20.1% of those in 1958. This modest fall was confined to operations on children aged 6 years or less, 12.3% of whom had their tonsils removed in the earlier cohort and 8.0% in the later. As Table 1 shows, above the age of 6 years there was little change in tonsillectomy between the
cohorts.

Both studies show the highest prevalence of tonsillectomy in the non-manual workers' children and the lowest in the semi-skilled and unskilled workers' children and both studies also show a declining prevalence in passing from the first born to the fifth and later born children.

There have been only small changes in the prevalence of tonsillectomy in Scotland, Wales and the North, whereas in the Midlands, and to a lesser extent in the South, there has been a substantial fall. The regional changes moreover are not related to the original prevalence of tonsillectomy. Thus Scotland with high rates in 1946 shows only slightly reduced rates in 1958 and Wales with low rates in 1946 shows a slight increase.

These comments refer to the prevalence of tonsillectomy in the two studies when each background variable is taken in turn. They make no allowance for interaction between the variables.

The analysis of variance used "Tonsillectomy by eleven" as the dependent variable and 'cohort effect', father's occupation (manual/non-manual) and anyone of sex, region or birth order as the independent variables. Thus three separate analyses were done, all of which showed a highly significant fall in tonsillectomy between 1946 and 1958. There were, however, no significant interactions.

A further analysis of variance to test differences in the age distribution of tonsillectomy in the two cohorts after allowing for father's occupation shows significant interactions between cohort and age. This analysis also shows that whilst there are social class differences in the age distribution of tonsillectomy within studies, these social class differences are the same for both studies. Thus the shift away from early tonsillectomy is not accounted for by postponement of the operation among middle class children in the 1958 cohort.

CIRCUMCISION

By 11 years 22.7% of the boys born in 1946 and 10.9% of those born in 1958 had been circumcised. Table 2 shows that this considerable reduction has been achieved by a fall in circumcision during the first 4 years of life. At later ages there has been no change — 5.2%* were circumcised after 4 years in the earlier study and 5.3% in the later.

The decline in circumcision is proportionally greatest for children of non-manual workers though at all occupational levels, and notably among the children of unskilled manual workers, the decline has been substantial.

In 1946 the major regional peculiarity was a low level of circumcision in Scotland and a high level in Wales — a reverse of the figures for tonsillectomy. By 1958 circumcision in Wales was much reduced and from having the highest rate it had moved to the second lowest. Only Scotland had a lower rate.

In both cohorts the chances of being circumcised were high for the first born and decreased as birth rank increased and in each birth rank the rates recorded in 1958 were substantially lower than those recorded in 1946.

The analysis of variance confirms both the movement away from early circumcision and the significance of the overall decline in circumcision. It also reveals statistically significant interactions between 'father's occupation and birth order' and between 'father's occupation and cohort'. Table 3 gives an indication of the nature of these interactions.

Table 3A shows that the non-manual/manual working class differences in circumcision which

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1946 cohort</th>
<th>1958 cohort</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>non-manual</td>
<td>manual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midlands</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>35.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>28.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>16.0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1946 cohort</th>
<th>1958 cohort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>non-manual</td>
<td>manual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth or higher</td>
<td>34.4</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1946 cohort</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>non-manual</td>
<td>manual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
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</table>
The prevalence of tonsillectomy fell from 26%* in the 1946 cohort to 20% in 1958 and the prevalence of circumcision from 23%* to 11%. In both studies, birth rank makes no difference to the risk of circumcision among middle class children. But among the manual working class children, the risk falls off steeply with increasing birth rank in both the 1946 and 1958 cohorts.

DISCUSSION
The prevalence of tonsillectomy fell from 26%* in the 1946 cohort to 20% in 1958 and the prevalence of circumcision from 23%* to 11%. In both operations the main fall appears to have been in early life, the first 6 years with tonsillectomy and the first year with circumcision. However, the ages given for tonsillectomy in the 1958 cohort were those recalled by the mothers and the ages of circumcision depended on recall in both cohorts. Remembered events tend to be advanced in time and this could explain part of the age differences described. On the other hand we have found that hospital admissions very early in a child's life are remembered with great accuracy by mothers, and it is only after children have reached the age of two that serious errors of recall occur. Early circumcisions are unlikely to be placed wrongly and the removal of tonsils in the pre-school years would be expected to be differentiated by mothers from their removal after 6 years. We therefore feel these age changes are not artefacts.

There was perhaps less agreement in the medical profession about the undesirability of tonsillectomy than about the undesirability of circumcision. In many respects however, the latter has less to be said against it as an operation and more to recommend it. It makes negligible calls on surgical resources and hospital beds and complications are rare. It is now evident that the majority of tight foreskins retract in later life, but when there are clinical reasons for the removal of the foreskin a successful cure is the outcome. Circumcised men rarely get cancer of the penis, are less vulnerable to venereal infection, and their wives may have a reduced risk of cervical cancer.

Circumcision is usually performed at an age when there seems little need to bother about the pain inflicted. In rats, however, early painful stimuli may have long lasting effects and it has been suggested that human infants also may be similarly affected. Richards et al (12) suggest that circumcision at birth may result in disturbances of behaviour that alter mother/child relations and could have long term implications for development. However, in the 1946 study no difference between uncircumcised and circumcised was found for a number of developmental and behavioural indices once birth rank, country of origin, occupational group and religion were allowed for. There is thus no reason to believe that the early pain of circumcision has any long term developmental effect even if there is evidence which suggests that circumcision may be related to early disturbance of the relationship between mother and child.

That circumcision has been so markedly reduced during these 10 years and more recently is explained by the very early age at which this operation is usually carried out so that refusal to circumcise a child immediately after birth is likely to lead to permanent retention of the foreskin unless there are later medical indications. It is clear from Table 2 that the decline in the operation has been solely owing to the reduction of early circumcisions, i.e. within the first 12 months and probably earlier than this since 71% of the circumcisions during the first year of life in the 1946 study were done in the early weeks after birth. The dramatic fall in the first year of life may therefore be attributed largely to paediatric opinion exerting itself through the hospitals.

The fall in the prevalence of tonsillectomy during this period was only half that recorded for circumcision and was mainly concentrated in the first six years of life. There have been no social class changes in the distribution of tonsillectomy in the two studies and this suggests that the fall has been independent of any generally disseminated views on the undesirability of tonsillectomy since these would have been expected to be best received by middle class families. The fall in the pre-school years and the failure to find a fall in the primary school years suggests another explanation, namely the different sources of medical advice available to parents and their children in these two stages of life. In the pre-school years it was the family doctor who recommended or refused to recommend tonsillectomy, but in the school years the school medical officers also played a part. Thus, at the 6 year school medical examination of the 1946 cohort children school doctors recommended that 7% should have their tonsils removed and during the subsequent year this is the proportion who lost them. In suggesting that the school medical officers were more resistant than family doctors to changing views on the value of tonsillectomy we should bear
in mind that in the 1930's and 1940's this operation was considered valuable by school medical officers who were constantly seeing undernourished children with discharging ears, running noses and greatly enlarged tonsils who had not been under medical care in their pre-school years. Indeed, so common was the recommendation for tonsillectomy in those days that the school medical service in some areas was known as "the tonsillectomy service". (Personal comment by retired S.M.O.)

The virtual elimination of occupational group differences between 1946 and 1958 in circumcision and their retention in tonsillectomy is unexpected. A more marked reduction of these differences in tonsillectomy would have been anticipated for the following reasons. Firstly, the advent of the National Health Service made surgery increasingly available to the poorer families although the availability of private practice may have benefited the affluent in attempts to avoid the delays caused by waiting lists. Secondly, the main reduction in tonsillectomy has been in the first six years i.e. at the age when social class differences in the 1946 cohort were most marked. Thirdly, middle class parents would have been expected to be more aware of changes in medical views than working class parents. This third explanation is based on the assumptions of a theory of cultural lag (4). Future comparisons with the 1970 cohort (16) may help to explain this anomaly.

Why is the prevalence of tonsillectomy in Scotland so high? It is evident that the poor housing conditions in Scotland compared with other regions (17) would put the population at a greater risk of infectious diseases such as respiratory complaints and so increase the likelihood of tonsillectomy. Alternatively, perhaps the explanation lies with availability of surgical resources and differences in surgical procedures. Firstly, Scotland has a larger proportion of ENT surgeons than other regions. Secondly, it could be argued that Scottish ENT practice is somewhat different and separate from English practice, i.e. they have a separate ENT Association. If so, these differences may have led to a heavier reliance in Scotland, than south of the border on examination evidence and a belief that a relatively wide spectrum of clinical signs indicate surgery. However, a difference in structure does not explain the large variation between Wales and the rest of the country.

Pre-school children in large families encounter infection brought back from school by their older siblings and so it would be expected that a high proportion would have infected tonsils and have them removed. Yet in both studies it is the older rather than the younger who lose their tonsils. If it is the school medical services which recommend children for tonsillectomy the low rates of tonsillectomy in later born children might be expected since on reaching school these children are more resistant to colds and sore throats owing to their pre-school infection.

Future comparisons with a later cohort (1970) may well show a more dramatic fall in tonsillectomy and a change in the social pattern. So far only figures for 993 children are available (18). They show 0.1% without tonsils at 4 (the figure in 1958 was 1.7%). A less dramatic change may be found in circumcision since 5.1% of 508 boys in the 1970 cohort had been circumcised by the age of 4 years (7.4% in 1958).

In this study we have presented statistical evidence of an association between a reduction in the prevalence of two surgical procedures and increasing professional criticism about their therapeutic or prophylactic efficacy. However the relationship between scientific medical knowledge, medical opinion and treatment policy needs closer scrutiny for as Richards (19) has shown there are problems "involved in the acceptance and rejection of new ideas and the assessment of the value of research from judgements based on narrow scientific terms".

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TONSILLECTOMY AND CIRCUMCISION


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