

From The Observer 'Life' Magazine, 1 March 1998

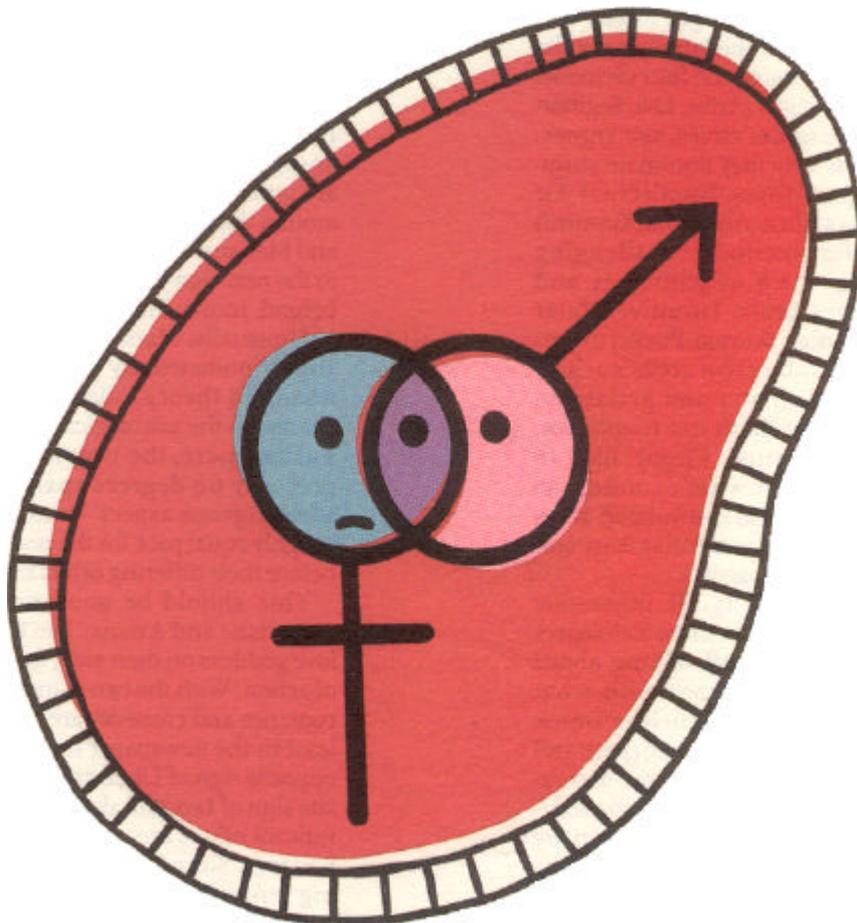


NOTEBOOK

The third sex

When a baby is not a boy. Nor a girl. By Jay Rayner

Newborn babies are experts at keeping secrets, their fragile, creased bodies and clenched eyes conspiring to tell us next to nothing about the selves they are to become. The only substantial clue any new parent can hope for lies with the brutal segregation of gender. A quick check in the right place and the cry goes up: congratulations, it's a boy; congratulations, it's a girl. This much you are allowed to know.



Some parents, however, are robbed even of this fragment of knowledge. A rare hormonal imbalance during pregnancy can affect the physical development of the genitals so that their shape becomes indeterminate. The child possesses a

tiny penis, say, or an enlarged clitoris, and in these circumstances it is fiendishly difficult to be certain to which gender the new arrival belongs. The condition is called intersex, and affects one child in 12,000, or about 60 births in Britain each year.

'This really is the most awful thing that can happen to anybody,' says Professor Charles Brook, who heads the intersex clinic at Great Ormond Street Hospital in London, the only one of its kind in Britain. 'It's a question that will affect people for life, and one to which, frankly, we do not have all the answers.' The condition, which can be caused by a malfunction of the mother's adrenal gland, can result in babies who are either chromosomally female but masculinised by exposure to male sex hormones or, conversely, chromosomally male but under-masculinised.

At Great Ormond Street there is a team of surgeons, gynaecologists, urologists, endocrinologists and psychologists who together try to decide, within the first year of a child's life, which gender it should be placed in. They use a combination of therapies, including reconstructive surgery of the genitalia and hormone treatments. 'Genetic females are generally raised as females after surgery,' says psychologist Melissa Hines, who works with Brook's team, 'because they usually have internal female organs.' However, it's not always that simple. The hormonal imbalance which leads to the condition can affect both brain and behavioural development as well as physical development. In short, the child can end up feeling male, despite being placed within the opposite gender. The physicians are therefore required to make the right call very early on in a child's life, when little about its future identity has been established, and when there are very few clues upon which to draw.

'It is a difficult, sweaty area of medicine to be in,' Brook says. 'And it's not until you're quite elderly that you see children coming to maturity and you can tell whether you have made mistakes or not.' Intersex cannot therefore be thought of as an issue to be dealt with solely at birth. The children have to be helped to understand their own condition; they may need hormone injections to take them through puberty; and some - though certainly not all - may find themselves sterile. Brook admits that he knows of mistakes being made but, he adds, many intersex people can go on to lead perfectly normal lives.

In the US, there is currently a debate over whether medical intervention to assign gender to intersex children is justified. A number of academics argue that the condition is evidence of more than just two rigid genders, and that a physical blurring of the distinction is something for society to deal with, not the individual. 'The position in America is all to do with knocking doctors off their pedestals,' says Brook, 'and it is something with which I have a certain sympathy. As I see it, if you had enough peers in these third or fourth genders, then it would seem a reasonable approach to leave the children as they are. Otherwise, it would strike me as being a rather lonely existence.'

Or, as Melissa Hines puts it: 'If we lived in a social vacuum, non-intervention would be best, but society expects us to conform.' It seems that in certain fields medicine becomes less a science than an art and, like all great arts, it can only ever aspire to perfection. Intersex, with its unique social and philosophical problems, is one of those fields of medicine. [End]