

David Reimer: The boy who lived as a girl

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Summer 1965. In a Winnipeg hospital, Janet Reimer's lifelong dream comes true as she gives birth to twin sons, Bruce and Brian.

But within six months, both boys develop difficulty urinating. The doctors suggest they be circumcised.



On April 27, 1966, Janet drops her boys off for the routine procedure and her dream turns into a nightmare.

The doctors had chosen an unconventional method of circumcision, one in which the skin would be burned. The procedure goes horribly wrong and Bruce's penis is burned so badly it can't be repaired surgically.

Over the next few months, the Reimers consult with countless doctors. None can offer any hope. Bruce Reimer would have to live with his non-existent penis.

One night, the Reimers see a television profile of an American doctor and his theories on sex and gender. Dr. John Money of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore argues that boys – caught early enough – could be raised to be girls. Nurture and not nature determines a child's gender, the doctor argued. Janet

Reimer thought it was worth exploring. The family went to Baltimore to see Dr. Money, who decided that Bruce Reimer was a perfect candidate.

At the age of 21 months, Bruce's testicles were removed. What remained of his penis was left, not to interfere with his urinary tract. When Bruce was released from hospital, his parents were told to raise him as a girl. The family was told not to divulge anything to anyone. They went home with a girl they called Brenda.

"We relatively quickly came to accept that," Janet Reimer told CBC News in 1997. "He was a beautiful little girl."

Janet Reimer did her best to raise Bruce as a girl. She dressed him in skirts and dresses and showed him how to apply make-up. But the transformation was anything but smooth. Bruce Reimer didn't like playing with the other girls – and he didn't move like one either. He got into schoolyard fistfights. The other kids called him names like "caveman," "freak" and "it."



In an interview with the CBC's *The Fifth Estate*, Reimer said it got so bad he didn't want to go to school anymore. He felt picked upon and increasingly lonely.

By the time Bruce turned nine, the Reimer family was having serious doubts. Not John Money. He published an article in the Archives of Sexual Behaviour pronouncing the experiment a resounding success. It became widely known in medical circles as the Joan/John case.

Money wrote: "The child's behaviour is so clearly that of an active little girl and so different from the boyish ways of her twin brother."

The twin brother, Brian, remembered it differently: "The only difference between him and I was he had longer hair." "I tried really, really hard to rear her as a gentle lady," Janet Reimer said. "But it didn't happen."

By the time Bruce was reaching puberty, it became increasingly clear the experiment was not working. He started developing thick shoulders and a thick neck. At the same time, the Reimers were under pressure from Money to take the final step: allow surgeons to create a vagina. But Bruce rebelled. He protested that he didn't need surgery and threatened to commit suicide if he was forced to make another trip to Baltimore to see Money.

That's when his father broke down and told him everything.



Bruce Reimer said he had one thought at the time: to go to the hospital and track down and shoot the doctor who had botched his circumcision. In the end, he was unable to exact his revenge, but turned his anger on himself.

He attempted suicide three times. The third – an overdose of pills – left him in a coma. He recovered and began the long climb towards living a normal life – as a man. Bruce Reimer left his Brenda identity behind. He cut his hair and started wearing male clothing again. He changed his name to David.

Earlier, the Reimer family had sued the hospital where the botched circumcision was performed. They settled for about \$60,000, which was held in trust for David until his 18th birthday. By then, the settlement was worth about \$100,000.

Initially, David Reimer only told his story from the shadows – he refused to talk about it if his identity were revealed. That changed in 2000, when American author John Colapinto wrote *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl*.

A whirlwind of media exposure followed, across Canada and the United States.

Around the same time, research was sounding the death knell for the nurture vs. nature theory. Two studies – released by the Johns Hopkins Children's Center – concluded that it's prenatal exposure to male hormones that turns normal male babies into boys. The studies "seriously question the current practice of sex-reassigning some of these infants as females..."

Janet Reimer said it was a difficult thing for her son to go public with his story, but he wanted to help other children facing a similar fate.

David Reimer underwent four rounds of reconstructive surgery to physically make him a man again. The surgery enabled him to enjoy a normal sex life, but he was unable to father children.

"I'm not going to cry a river of tears over that, because I've got three great kids. I've got a wonderful wife. I've got a good home," he told CBC News in the wake of the release of the book.

Recently, David Reimer's life had taken another turn. He lost his job and was separated from his wife. His mother said he was still grieving the death two years ago of his twin brother.

David Reimer committed suicide on May 4, 2004. He was 38.

