

SAfrica sees rise in post-circumcision deaths

June 30 2010, By ERIC NAKI , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- South African health officials said Tuesday they are alarmed by the rise in deaths among men who have had botched traditional circumcisions, after 39 young men died in the last month after undergoing the rite of passage into manhood.

Health officials estimate that as many as six young men have died every weekend in the past few weeks and that more than 120 young men are in hospitals nursing their botched wounds. Eastern Cape provincial health department spokesman Sizwe Kupelo said the practice is common in the province.

Eighteen-year old boys generally undergo circumcision rites during school holidays, in midyear or at the end of the year. The procedure is performed outdoors by a traditional leader who uses a spear to remove the foreskin.

The custom has drawn criticism because the circumcision is generally performed by unqualified traditional leaders in unsanitary conditions. Health officials say there is a high risk of infection, which can lead to amputation or even death.

Kupelo said 91 newly circumcised men died last year alone, and of those 56 occurred during midyear school holidays. He said five traditional surgeons have been arrested since the beginning of June. He said the government in the Eastern Cape has prohibited the practice in some areas where circumcision deaths have been particularly high.

National health department chief Precious Matsoso said the health department considered the situation to be "unacceptable."

She added, "While we accept and respect the right of people to practice their traditions, this has to be done within the context of acceptable health norms and standards so that we can prevent such deaths."

Circumcision is practiced in several communities in South Africa, and also across Africa. The practice has gained popularity in previous years because scientists think circumcision reduces the chances of [HIV infection](#) because the foreskin is particularly susceptible to HIV.

AIDS experts from the [World Health Organization](#) have said mass [circumcision](#) could prevent about 4 million adult HIV infections between 2009 and 2025.

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