

# Research highlights lack of support for New Zealanders with intersex conditions

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Dr Geraldine Christmas studied medical management of intersexuality in New Zealand and the level of support available for intersex New Zealanders—those whose bodies fall between male and female—and their families.

Although medical publications indicate that intersex conditions may occur in two percent of live births, the New Zealand rates are not known. However, Dr Christmas says her research indicates the numbers in New Zealand are comparatively small.

"That means some doctors and nurses here may have very little practical experience of supporting intersex people and their families. In bigger countries, there are centres with specialists in the field but here it can be difficult for families to find medical staff who know much about the condition."

Dr Christmas attended lectures at New Zealand medical schools to hear first-hand what trainee doctors learn about intersexuality and interviewed a range of health professionals and support agency staff. She also talked to a sample group of intersex New Zealanders.

She found that some doctors and nurses hold traditional views about gender identity and parents of intersex babies can be pressured into choosing surgery to 'normalise' their child's body.

"There is still a lot of shame and secrecy surrounding intersexuality. One

mother I interviewed talked about being given a videotape of intersex people who had not had surgery and warning them that their children may not be successful or accepted if they did not go ahead with the surgery.

"But the problem with surgery is that it is irreversible and the choice parents make for their child when they are very young may turn out not to be the right one."

Dr Christmas says she spoke to clinicians who are keen to provide better support for intersex people by establishing an Australasian multi-disciplinary group which would include doctors, nurses, psychologists, social workers and representatives from community support agencies.

"The main theme of my interviews with parents of intersex people is that they need really good support from the time that their baby is born.

"They need information that doesn't pathologise the condition or make it seem damaging or dangerous and they need reassurance that they are not alone."

Her research also shows that intersex people have widely differing views on their condition and their [gender identity](#).

"Some parents, especially in rural areas with closer-knit communities, are concerned that their children may become the subject of gossip and experience discrimination. Some people don't see themselves as intersex, even if they have an intersex condition, while others are fluid in how they describe their gender.

**More information:** Read the research findings here: [researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/handle/10063/2845](https://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/handle/10063/2845)

Provided by Victoria University

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