



## The Silent Plague of Vasectomies

There is a silent moral plague: the seldom preached about grave violation of sexual ethics represented by male sterilization through a vasectomy. In this procedure the two *vas deferens* tubes are severed or blocked so that sperm cannot exit the testicles, rendering the man sterile. Catholic moral teaching is quite clear that contraception is a mortal sin and sterilization is an even more serious sin since it involves the mutilation of healthy organs in both male vasectomies and female fallopian tube ligations. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2399 and 2297)

Vasectomies are heavily promoted in the world of birth control as an easier and less risky form of sterilization than tubal ligations for women. There is even a “World Vasectomy Day” proclaimed by a consortium of birth control groups and activists. After circumcision, vasectomies are the second most common surgical procedure on men in the US. [Half a million](#) are done every year in America, generally as a 15–20-minute outpatient procedure in a doctor’s office. Most men are able to go about normal activities in 2–3 days and report [“full recovery”](#) in 8–9 days.

The first vasectomy in the US on a human was done in [1897](#) by a doctor who described the procedure in a case report entitled, “Surgical Treatment of Habitual Criminals.” It seems that the racist eugenicist movement was an early promoter of vasectomy, especially in the context of prison inmates. It was seen as a way to lower the incidence of criminal behavior and the passing on of “bad genes” to future generations. Vasectomies eventually became used on the general population starting in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

There is some good news. There does seem to be a [trend](#) towards falling numbers of vasectomies in the USA. Those who promote the procedure lament the fact that it is declining in popularity. Relatively few nations have high rates of vasectomies—notably New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the US. It is not a common intervention in most countries and is least popular in Africa and Latin America.

As said above, vasectomies are rarely discussed in public contexts, so I was struck by the huge headlines proclaiming “Vasectomy Reversal” on several billboards I saw while driving the expressways around Houston a few years ago. There is in fact a longer and more involved micro-surgery that can reverse the sterility of some men who undergo vasectomies. The aphorism that it is always more difficult to restore than it is to destroy applies here. The longer the time since the operation, the lower the percentage of success in reversing the sterility induced by a vasectomy. Still, it seems that, if done by a skilled microsurgery specialist, success rates can range from 30-90%. It is notable that between [6 and 10%](#) of vasectomized men attempt to have their fertility surgically restored in the USA.

The equally grave moral violation of doing a vasectomy or a tubal ligation is, however, the key ethical consideration, not the relative ease, cost, or reversibility of the procedures. It is true that tubal ligations are much more dangerous to do than vasectomies since the operation involves general anesthesia and is more invasive. I find it quite striking, however, that some feminists and population controllers insist on the truthful observation that most of the burden of contraception and sterilization falls on women. This does indeed point to anti-woman sexism in the ugly world of “reproductive rights” and acknowledges in a grudging way the many negative side effects of contraception and sterilization. The obvious thing that they completely fail to see, however, is that their whole premise—that fertility and even normal pregnancies can be pathological conditions that are to be “cured” by drugs, implanted devices, and even surgery—is perverse.

A vasectomy can only be attractive to a person who has acute moral blindness when it comes to the beauty of healthy sexuality and fertility. One of the main concerns that vasectomy advocates try to alleviate is the fear that a man’s sexual performance or pleasure will be impaired by the operation. They seem to think that as long as hedonistic sex is possible, and medical complications are a small risk, it is great for men to get sterilized. This is indeed a very “sterile” line of reasoning.

The incredible plan that God revealed to us in His vision of one man and one woman freely entering a sacramental marital covenant that is a lifelong union of love, fertility, and fidelity is breath-takenly beautiful. This includes a definition of sexual union as the total self-gift of the spouses that never actively rejects the gift of children by the use of contraception or sterilization. Appropriate considerations of responsible parenthood may lead couples to put off the conception of children by using natural methods of fertility regulation but never to actively intervene in order to destroy their fertility. The joy of being able to procreate a new and priceless human being is perhaps the greatest blessing in a married couple’s life.

The contrasting viewpoints could not be further apart. The hedonistic culture of death whispers, go ahead ... it is as easy as two surgical snips and enjoy sex with whomever you wish without fear of conceiving children. The Catholic culture of life proclaims that children are blessings to be cherished as a gift from a fruitful and mutual self-donation in conjugal love. The ability to have children is fragile and not to be taken for granted, as so many couples who suffer from infertility know. To treat the possibility of procreating children as a threat to be surgically remedied is a tragedy.