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NYC bars two men from practicing Jewish circumcision after infants contract herpes

The city has circumscribed two of the six mohels on Wednesday from practicing the ultra-Orthodox circumcision ritual after more cases of infants contracted herpes through the ritual.

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The city has banned two men from performing a controversial ultra-Orthodox circumcision practice after babies were infected with herpes — but won't release their names and will rely on them to comply on their own.

Health Commissioner Mary Bassett said Wednesday the city has identified two of the six mohels believed to be responsible for giving infants herpes through a ritual where they suck the blood from the infant's newly circumcised genitals — known as metzitzah b'peh — and ordered them not to practice pending a herpes test.

"We expect them to comply," she told the City Council.

But Bassett said the names of the blacklisted mohels would not be made public.

"We have defended the department's decision in court not to make these names available. People are entitled to their privacy," she told reporters after the hearing, adding that the names of the infected children are also often mentioned on the order and the city wants to shield them.

The de Blasio administration repealed a requirement that parents sign a consent form before their child undergoes the ritual, imposed by former Mayor Mike Bloomberg.

Since the change, six babies have developed herpes after undergoing the ritual, it was revealed earlier this month.

Health Commissioner Mary Bassett said Wednesday the city has identified two of the six mohels believed to be responsible for giving infants herpes through a the ultra-Orthodox circumcision ritual. (Susan Watts/New York Daily News)

Mayor de Blasio said Wednesday that after concluding its previous policy of working with community leaders had failed, the city now planned to do outreach to encourage mothers to quiz their mohels about their herpes status.

Jewish criticism sees NYC circumcision ritual rule nixed

"We tried a new policy. It didn't work either — which I'm very unhappy about," he said at an unrelated press conference in Queens. "I don't think those community leaders did all they could have done. So now we're going in a different direction."

"We're going to do a much more intensive effort to educate parents, particular mothers, as to the dangers of this practice. And we're going to say to them, it's important to ask the mohel — if you choose to engage in this practice, that's your right, and we respect religious freedom — but ask the mohel if they are infected with herpes. And if they are, you should find a different mohel. It's as simple as that."

Asked directly if it was ever appropriate for an adult to suck the penis of an infant, the mayor demurred.

"This is religious tradition and look I'm keenly aware of our Constitution," he said.

City delays vote on scrapping circumcision ritual policy

The sexually transmitted infection, which is very common in adults, can be fatal in infants. But Bassett said none of the six babies have gotten seriously ill — likely because parents have been seeking treatment quickly —and the boy diagnosed this year is "doing fine."

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The mohels could face a \$2,000 fine for violating the ban, but officials said the department does not expect to proactively check to see if they're obeying. The men are only banned from performing metzitzah b'peh, not from all circumcisions.

Bassett said she stands by the move to abandon the consent form requirement, despite the new herpes cases.

"I stand by that recommendation," she said. "It was not working. It was not being administered to the parents, and it was causing a huge uproar in the community."

Rule change for circumcision procedure advances

The commissioner said the city does not consider the ritual safe, but cannot stop parents with a "spiritual attachment" from going through with it.

"The Health Department considers this an unsafe practice, and we recommend that people not engage in it," she said. "Nonetheless, it is a legal practice."

Councilman Corey Johnson, chair of the health committee, questioned whether the city's latest approach would be effective.

"I think we can all agree that babies should not get herpes," he said.