

Male circumcision in South Africa: knowledge, disinhibition and timing

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BACKGROUND

Medical Male Circumcision (MMC) reduces the risk of HIV transmission, but programmes promoting MMC are just starting. We explored the knowledge of HIV risk reduction benefits of male circumcision and levels of sexual disinhibition among South African men, a subject on which little is known.

METHODOLOGY

A multi-stage, stratified random sample survey of 9,728 respondents was conducted in nine provinces of South Africa between April and August 2009. The survey was designed to be representative of 16-55 year old males and females. Face-to-face interviews were conducted using a structured, pre-tested questionnaire. Data were analysed using STATA version 11.0. Chi-squared and T-tests were used to test for association.

RESULTS

Of the 9,728 respondents 4,437 (46%) were males. Mean age of males was 29.2 [range: 16-55] years. The question on circumcision status was answered by 4,353 men and 1,936 (42%) of those were circumcised. The prevalence of circumcision was significantly different by province (Figure 1). Limpopo (77%) and Eastern Cape (73%) had the highest prevalence of male circumcision. In these provinces, male circumcision is done for cultural reasons.

Figure 2 shows the settings where men who are circumcised had their circumcision done. The majority (67%) of circumcised men were circumcised in a traditional setting.

A quarter (25%) of men were circumcised before the age of 18 years (Figure 3). The mean age of sexual debut is 17 years for men and this means that the other 17% of those who reported that they were circumcised would likely have undergone circumcision only after becoming sexually active.

Both men and women were asked whether they think male circumcision has health benefits and if so, what they are. Among both men and women, there was little knowledge about the HIV risk reduction benefits of male circumcision. For example, only 8% of both males and females combined knew that male circumcision reduces HIV risk.

Reported condom use at last sex was at 50% among circumcised men and 48% among those not circumcised. Similarly, there were no differences in the percentage of multiple sexual partners in the past 12 months between circumcised (21%) and uncircumcised men (20%).

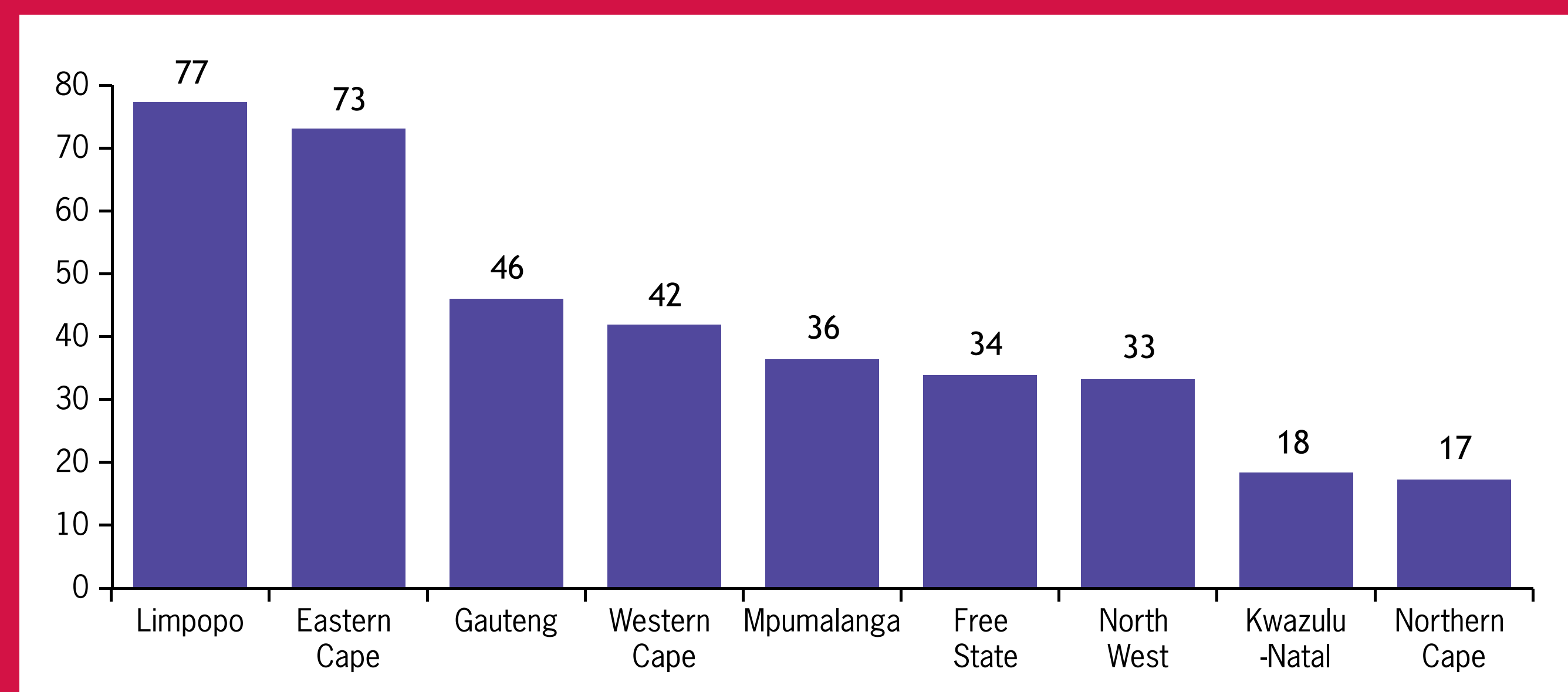


FIGURE 1: PREVALENCE OF CIRCUMCISION BY PROVINCE

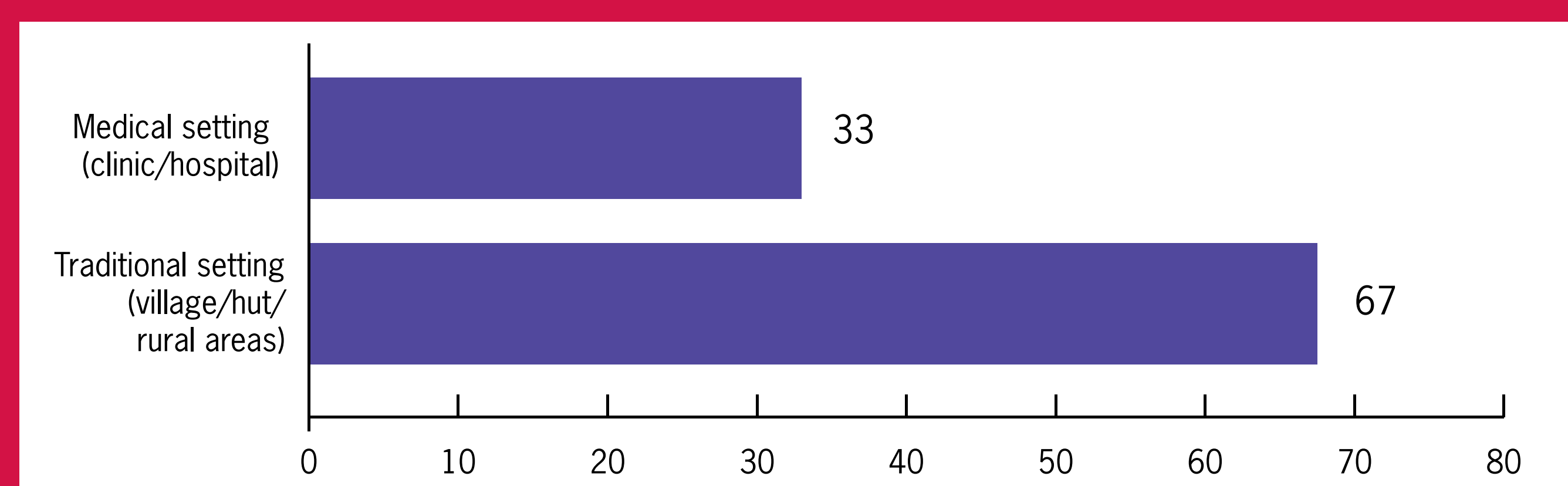


FIGURE 2: CIRCUMCISION BY SETTING/PLACE OF CIRCUMCISION

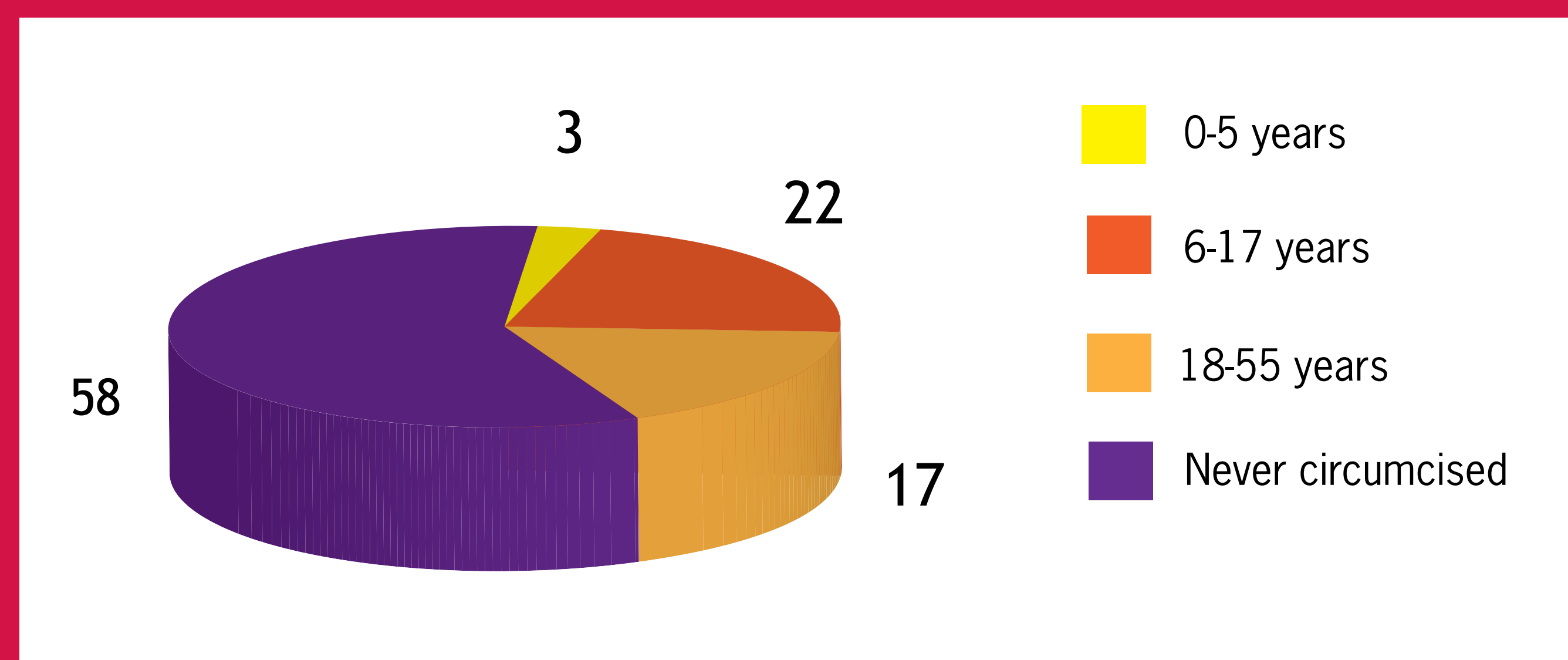


FIGURE 3: AGE AT TIME OF CIRCUMCISION

CONCLUSION

Most men in South Africa who are circumcised do so for cultural reasons. Knowledge of the HIV risk reduction benefit is still very low, which may pose a challenge for MMC programmes as they scale up. However, circumcised men have similar sexual risk patterns to those uncircumcised, which is encouraging. HIV communication programmes need to continue to promote MMC as a risk reduction method, but still promote condom use and reducing number of sexual partners.

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