

From time to time there is a dramatic announcement of a man changing over to being a woman or of a woman turning into a man. This sounds a quite impossible thing to do, so what in fact really does happen in these remarkable but unusual cases?

# CHANGE of SEX

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CAN anyone actually change his sex? The answer to this is they can't, but what can happen is that a female child may be born with the external sex organs of a male, and vice versa. In fact, the deception is never complete, but it is often good enough for mistakes to be made quite easily and in perfectly good faith leading to a boy being brought up as a girl, and a girl being brought up as a boy.

How can this happen? At a very early stage in the development of the baby, when it is less than the size of a pea, the primitive sexual apparatus looks exactly the same whether a child is destined to be a male or a female. During the succeeding weeks, some parts of this apparatus grow while others practically disappear. It is differences in this phase of the process that produce the characteristic features of male and female sex organs by which the sex of a person is so easily recognised.

## Dual organs

But we all in fact carry vestiges of the other sex in our bodies. Thus, embedded in the prostate gland of the male is a minute womb. Lying close to the ovary of the female are the remnants of male sex channels. It only needs something to go wrong in the controlling mechanism and the wrong structures will be developed at the expense of the right ones. This is what actually happens in human development, right from the moment of conception in these rather special cases.

Normally the entire process is controlled by the developing ovary or testicle. By producing the right hormone at the right time, sexual development in the embryo baby proceeds smoothly to the normal end-point. However, these sex hormones are also produced by another pair of glands, the adrenals. If these hormones happen to be of the wrong kind, and are produced in sufficient quantity, the influence of the ovary or testis is overcome. Development proceeds in the wrong direction and starts to get muddled.

Can we always be sure of the true sex of these individuals? Until recently this posed

quite a problem. Now it can be done simply by examining scrapings from the inside of the mouth under the microscope. And an expert can give the right answer to this question immediately.

What about treatment? This is both medical and surgical. For true females with masculine characteristics, cortisone is very effective in suppressing the over-active adrenal glands, and allowing the ovaries to exert their normal feminising influence. Plastic surgery is usually required to complete the transformation. Thus, the vagina may be small or completely covered over, necessitating some form of reconstruction. It is rare for these patients to bear children subsequently, but it is certainly possible for them to have a normal and happy married life.

Not all these cases require treatment. It is entirely wrong to recommend it in an adult unless the patient specifically requests it. Many have become psychologically attuned to their false state. They think, feel and look like members of the opposite sex. Indeed, many are entirely unaware that there is anything wrong at all. They regard themselves as normal.

These are the cases that do not get into the papers. Most of those that do have discovered their true sex in adult life, and have felt compelled to seek advice. As a rule, the greater the success in treatment, the less the likelihood of being able to remain completely anonymous.

## Rare intersex

All this, of course, has no relation to homosexuality. People with homosexual tendencies are as a rule entirely normal physically. Neither has it any bearing on other abnormalities such as transvestitism, which is an overwhelming desire to dress as a member of the opposite sex. These are psychiatric and psychological problems and relatively common.

On the contrary, intersex is rare, and this is the correct technical name for the kind of faulty development before birth that has only been fully understood and treated with great success in recent years.