

Ohio Woman Still Scarred By 'Love' Doctor's Sex Surgery : Women Allege Dr. James Burt Redesigned Their Genitalia Without Their Knowledge By SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES

Cheryl Sexton Dillon's life was forever altered at the age of 36 when her doctor recommended a hysterectomy although she only needed minor bladder surgery. While she was under the knife, he performed a nine-hour operation, relocating her vagina and removing her clitoral hood. Dillon said she had no idea he would do more than a standard hysterectomy.

Dillon, who in 1984 was a vocational teacher with three children, said afterward, "I thought I would die. The pain was unlike anything I had ever experienced in places I couldn't understand." She said even ordinary activities became impossible -- sitting down, wearing pants, riding a horse. Dillon could no longer have sex without excruciating pain, and despite an understanding husband, her happy marriage eventually fell apart. The surgeon she trusted, Dr. James C. Burt, an eccentric but respected ob/gyn at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Dayton, Ohio, was a proponent of procedures to redesign women's genitalia. In his 1975 book, "Surgery of Love," he wrote, "Women are structurally inadequate for intercourse. This is a pathological condition amenable to surgery." From 1966 until the late-1980s when he surrendered his medical license, Burt had performed hundreds of these experimental surgeries on his patients, according to numerous national reports at the time, including one in The New York Times. In 1988, the Ohio Medical Board cited Burt for alleged "experimental and medical unnecessary surgical procedures, in some incidents without proper patient consent." And now, Sarah B. Rodriguez, a lecturer in medical humanities at Northwestern University, takes a fresh look at the bizarre case in an article in the November Archives of Sexual Behavior. Patients who underwent these procedures have said they thought they were getting surgery for common ailments like incontinence or post-pregnancy repairs. Many, like Dillon, said they did not sign adequate consents. According to Rodriguez, St. Elizabeth's began requiring Burt to use a "special consent form specific to love surgery" in 1979. By his own admission, he did not always get proper consent for some of his earliest surgeries. "When I went to [Dr. Burt] and asked, 'What have you done,?' he said, 'What are you talking about?'" said Dillon. "I found out from other doctors that I had been mutilated."

One said her genitals looked like "a filleted fish." Burt's son James C. Burt III, 68 of Los Angeles, defended his father's medical practices in an email to ABCNews.com: "There are hundreds and hundreds of Dr. Burt's patients, alive today, whose marriages and lives were dramatically improved by [his] wholesome restoration to their fully functioning sexual responsiveness, which most of those patients had previously enjoyed earlier in their marriages." "Until there are those in the media or the medical profession who are willing to look at the successful results, which fully benefited the lives of countless numbers of his patients, there should and will be no further comment on behalf of Dr. Burt or his family." Dr. Burt, now 91, has not been available for comment directly. Rodriguez had followed Burt since the late 1970s when he was promoting the idea of "altering a woman's body for male sexual pleasure." Later, in the 1980s, she examined whether or not women had given informed consent to his procedures. Other doctors tried to alert the state medical board about Burt, but it did not take action until then Ohio Gov. Richard F. Celeste became aware of this medical procedure and reached out to the board demanding answers, according to a 1988 article in the Columbus Dispatch. Doctors around the country were shocked. "It's a disgrace to all of medicine," Dr. Sidney M. Wolfe, told the New York Times in 1991. "His procedures were several standard deviations from what is acceptable," said Wolfe, who at the time was director of the Public Citizens Health Research Group. "And only now are people who should have spoken up 20 years ago slowly, timidly coming out of the closet." Today, at 65, Dillon is writing a book about speaking out against Burt. She was one of the first to file a malpractice lawsuit in 1985 against both Burt and the hospital where the surgery took place. "From what I remember, by default I won against Dr. Burt, and got nothing," she said. Dillon said she settled with St. Elizabeth's Hospital out of court. When she first went to Burt, whom her first husband, an anesthesiologist, knew personally, Dillon was already in a happy second marriage with three children. "[Burt] said, 'You don't really need to have any more kids,' I went ahead and got a hysterectomy," she said. "You trust your doctor." Her surgery was so long and complicated, Dillon was barely conscious for five days following the procedure and was out of work for six weeks. "I thought I was going to die," she said.

'Love Surgery' Strained a 12-Year Marriage

Dillon eventually sought help from the University of Cincinnati. "I asked for the best doctor, because I had to find out what was wrong with me," she said. "He looked at me and called in one of the nurses and said, 'Have you ever seen anything like this?' He had repositioned my vagina and circumcised me," said Dillon. "The doctor said he had never seen it anywhere except in African tribes," she said. The surgery strained her 12-year marriage. "For the first time in my life I was happily married to a wonderful man," said Dillon. "The way I was deformed, I couldn't have sex. I ended up going through three different corrective surgeries but by that time, my marriage was shot and I lost the best thing that had happened in my life." Dillon went public with her story in 1988 on the television news magazine show "West 57th Street" and found others who had suffered similar surgeries. "We said we have to stop this man," she said. "I don't want to die young and have my daughter go to the same doctor." At the time, Burt called the television report, "a conspiracy of lies," according to the Columbus Dispatch. That same year, Burt was formally charged by the Ohio Medical Board for "gross immorality" and "grossly unprofessional conduct." He surrendered his license in 1989 to avoid further review. Several other women filed malpractice lawsuits against Burt, but according to the New York Times, many of the cases were dropped because doctors would not testify.

Sandy Nagrotsky, a malpractice attorney from Lake Success, N.Y., was one of the lawyers who sued Burt for malpractice. "What he did was diabolical -- outrageous," said Nagrotsky. "Women trusted their doctor and he took advantage of them." "I don't know if he was motivated by or disturbed in terms of his sexuality or if he hated women," he said. "Who knows if he was crazy? But he believed he could create a better woman." "Honestly, I have never seen anything like this," said Nagrotsky. "Most [medical] mistakes are never intentional. This had to be unless he didn't understand human anatomy. He must have known it would result in complications."

Burt filed for bankruptcy in 1991. But in 1994, he announced plans to launch a foundation dedicated to making his "love" surgeries accepted medical practice. He said he had many satisfied patients and was being copied by "expert plastic surgeons."

Dillon said she still lives with the pain of the ordeal, "on a daily basis."

"I still can't do things I used to love to do," she said. "It's been debilitating."

After moving around, living in Mexico and Florida, Dillon eventually moved back to Ohio and now is retired and living with her elderly parents as their caretaker.

"My life has taken a lot of different turns and ups and downs," she said. "So much of it happened because of that part of my life."

Dillon said she finds solace in those she loves -- her parents who both have Alzheimer's disease, three children and seven grandchildren.