Britain - Which of these women were born men?

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Article amended by Mermaids

Imagine living your live feeling trapped in a man's body, unable to dress, behave or be treated as the person you feel you are. Chris Morris hears the inspiration stories of three male-to-female transsexuals.

What is transsexualism?

One in 10,000 men and one 30,000 women are born transsexual.

Unlike transvestites, who cross-dress occasionally for fun or sexual kicks, transsexuals feel trapped in the wrong body.

One Dutch study believes the condition is caused by an imbalance of the sex hormones that affect the brain's development in the womb at six to nine weeks. This research showed that one small part of a male-to-female transsexual brain is physiologically the same as that of a woman, while the brains of gay and straight men are identical.

How do you change sex?

- At least 5,000 people have had a sex-change operation in the UK in the past 30 years.
- The sex-change process begins with a referral to a psychiatrist and counselling.
- Male transsexuals then start oestrogen treatment, which helps them develop breasts, smoother skin and rounder hips. Body hair is also reduced, while facial heir is removed by electrolysis or laser.
- Patients live as a woman for at least a year to prove that they are happy and socially stable in their new role. They must come out at work, but are protected from discrimination by law. During this time, documents such as driving licence and passport are changed to 'female'. Proposals are under way to change birth certificates.
- More counselling follows before the three- to four-hour operation on patients over eighteen.
- Dr Russell Reid, consultant psychiatrist at London's Hillingdon Hospital, says about 75 per cent of male-to-female transsexuals, striving to live as 'normal' women, have heterosexual male partners.

'When I hit puberty, my erections repulsed me'

*******, 21, works for an Internet company. She had sex-change surgery in October. 'I had the operation to change my body from a man's to a woman's eight months ago. You can get it done

on the NHS, but it takes five years, so I took out a bank loan for £9,000 and went private instead.

'I was scared about going into hospital. It's a three-hour operation, which involved removing my testicles and penile tissue, and inverting the penile skin and scrotum to make a vagina. They made a clitoris out of tissue from part of my glans. I had been taking oestrogen for a year to slow my facial hair, but I had to stop taking it a month before the operation. So while they were making my vagina, I was lying there with a beard.

'The main worry with the operation is something going wrong afterwards, such as deep-vein thrombosis, vaginal prolapse or that the clitoris might be too sensitive or numb. But I just wanted to get it over with. For me, starting the oestrogen treatment a year before had been more important. As well as slowing down my facial hair, it gave me softer skin, small breasts and made my nipples more sensitive.

'I've felt different for as long as I can remember. I was bullied at school for being feminine. When puberty arrived, I was repulsed by my erections and deepening voice. At times I felt suicidal.

'It wasn't until I was nineteen that I understood what being transsexual was. I'd bought a computer and looked it up on websites. It basically meant I was a woman trapped in a man's body - I had a female brain. Until then, I thought it was just the weirdos you saw on The Jerry Springer Show. I sat there almost shouting: "That's me! That's me!" as I read people's stories.

'I told my mum a few months later. I'd been dressing up in secret and one I day she caught me wearing one of her dresses. I sat on the sofa and burst into tears. It took six months for her to understand what it was I wanted. But she did some research and she's great now.

'I was officially diagnosed as a transsexual in August 2000 and referred to psychiatrists. As well as starting the hormone treatment, I had to live as a woman full-time for a year to prove to them that I'd be happy in the female role. "********" is what my mum would have called me if I'd been born a girl.

'It's cost me around £15,000 to change sex. That includes the psychiatry bills, the operation and electrolysis and laser sessions to remove the rest of my facial hair. I need up to ten sessions for it to be permanent and I'll need speech therapy to feminise my voice. It's been worth every penny, though. There are still a few things that get me down, like having to shave twice a week and rub oestrogen gel on my breasts to help them grow, but I'm happy with myself now.

'I didn't have any expectations about the results of my operation, but Mum said she was impressed. At first, my vagina was very swollen. Even now, I have to use a special instrument a sort of medical dildo - which I insert once a day for fifteen minutes to stop it healing up. It used to be three times a day, first with a small one, then with a big one.

'For a while after the op. my body didn't know what sex was, even if my brain did. However, I'm able to have sex again now, which I'm very happy about physically. I'm a bisexual female and I'm in a relationship with another male-to-female transsexual. My sex drive is less urgent than it used to be and I don't think about sex all the time. I can orgasm and the sensation is much the same as when I was a man. I don't miss my penis. It's just been changed to a different shape. 'Nobody would choose to go I through this. But I've never once thought about changing my mind. It's what I've had to do _ to be happy.'

'Coming out was very frightening'

**********, 22, is a website designer. She realised she was transsexual at nineteen, and is now living as a woman while waiting for sex-change surgery. 'Before I knew I was transsexual, i went through years of pain. I thought I must be gay, bisexual or a transvestite, and often felt suicidal. It's only now that I'm living as a woman that I finally feel comfortable with myself.

'I expect to have my sex-change operation in August. By then, I'll have completed my "real-life" test by living as a female for a year. I was diagnosed as transsexual last August and I've been ******** ever since. I've always known I'm different - I used to buy clothes from Top Shop and try them on in secret - so although it's scary, it's a relief, too. The day I was prescribed female hormones, I literally ran to the chemist so l could start taking them.

'The real-life test is the hardest bit for any transsexual because it involves coming out, which is very frightening. My dad doesn't talk about it much, but I know he wants me to be happy. My older brother says he's proud of me and my colleagues have been great. I told them by e-mail and got messages back saying: "Good luck" and "You're so brave".

'Men do behave differently to me now. They open doors and I've even had wolf whistles, but that's just funny. My sexuality is lesbian.

'I know now that a genital defect I was born with has contributed to my transsexualism. One of my testicles didn't descend properly because of hormone imbalances in my mum's womb, which is often the case with transsexuals. Although I'm taking out a loan for the operation, it's worth it as I'm 90 per cent comfortable with the way I am now and the operation will just complete the change.

'When people stare at me, I still get worried that they've guessed and will say something. It hasn't happened yet, though. After coming this far, the most important lesson I've learned is to do whatever makes me feel comfortable. Otherwise, I don't know where I'd be.'

'I'll have my sperm frozen'

*********, sixteen, is about to do a beauty therapy course. She Is on hormone treatment and hopes to have sex-change surgery when she's 21. 'I became ****** - the female ********* - on my sixteenth birthday.

I kept my male name because it sounds feminine, too. The night before, I had my hair braided, a manicure and leg wax, and went to bed in a nightie. The next day, I put on a gel-filled bra, skirt, top and platform shoes. Looking in the mirror was such a thrill.

'When I was twelve, I wrote my mum a letter, saying I should have been born a girl. She was in tears when she read it and said I was confused. We talked it over for days before getting professional advice. A gender specialist told me it could just be puberty. However, if it was something deeper, I'd have to wait until I was sixteen to start changing sex legally, and eighteen till I could have the op. But over the next four years, my feelings just got stronger.

'When I turned sixteen, I started having injections to suppress my testosterone. That helped, but I had terrible mood swings.

'Since I've started dressing as a girl, I get a lot of male attention. I'm a straight female inside and I fancy men, but i know I can't see anybody right now in case it gets physical, so I just flirt. The other day, this man offered to carry my shopping and started chatting me up. He'd actually known me as male *********, but didn't realise.

'My mum does wonder if I've made the decision too early. She'd like grandchildren, so I plan to have sperm frozen before the op that can be used to fertilise the egg of a surrogate mum.

'My grandparents say I'll always be their grandson, which upsets me. I hate being reminded I was a boy. Every time I have a bath I'm reminded and get depressed.

'It's not easy living like this. I used to get angry that other teenagers had "normal" lives, but the feeling isn't half as bad now that I know who I am.'

The operation

- During gender-reassignment surgery erectiie tissue is removed from the penis, leaving the urethra (for urination) and part of the nerves of the glans (to form a clitoris).
- An incision is made through the perineum' end skin from the penis and scrotum is turned inwards to form the vagina and labia.
- Healing takes up to three months During this time the patient has to use a medical dilator to stop their vagina closing up. The use decreases over time, but can last for several years.

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