

# David Reimer

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David Reimer, who committed suicide on May 4 aged 38, was the unwitting guinea pig in a notorious medical experiment known as the John/Joan case in the 1960s and 1970s.

Having been born a boy and undergone a botched circumcision operation, Reimer was brought up as a girl - only to reassert his identity later in life as a boy.

One of identical twins, he was born Bruce Reimer on August 22 1965 at Winnipeg, Canada. When Bruce and his brother Brian were seven months old a doctor recommended that they should be circumcised. Their parents duly drove the boys through a snowstorm to the St Boniface Hospital in Winnipeg for what was supposedly a routine operation, but the regular surgeon had not made it in and an assistant took over.

Bruce was the first to be operated on, and the procedure went horribly wrong. The electric cauterising machine being used by the surgeon caused severe burning to his penis, so that it eventually fell off. His twin brother was spared the operation.

Surgery to mitigate the damage had yet to be developed, and for a few months Bruce's parents wondered what to do. Then one evening they saw a television programme featuring Dr John Money, a flamboyant medical psychologist and self-styled "missionary of sex" from New Zealand. Money was a leading proponent of the theory that gender was not necessarily predetermined in the womb, but could be decided later by environmental factors. In the programme he was discussing his work changing the sex of babies without properly formed sex organs.

The Reimer parents arranged to meet Money at his Psychohormonal Research Unit at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore; they were soon persuaded by the doctor that the best course of action would be for Bruce to have further surgery and hormone treatment to turn him into a girl. For the doctor, Bruce Reimer offered the perfect opportunity to prove his theory, especially given the existence of his twin brother as a "control".

Thereafter Bruce grew up as Brenda. Childhood photographs show him with wavy, shoulder-length, chestnut hair and in dresses. But when his mother first put him in a dress at the age of two, he tore it off, and, given dolls, he appeared to prefer his brother Brian's trucks. At school he was victimised by girls for going to the loo standing up, and then found himself excluded from the boys' lavatory as well. "He had to go in the back alley," his mother recalled. At the age of nine he suffered a nervous breakdown.

Money, meanwhile, advertised his "John/Joan study" as a great leap forward, even persuading Time magazine to run an article which asserted that: "This dramatic case

provides strong support for a major contention of women's liberationists: that conventional patterns on masculine and feminine behaviour can be altered."

Brian Reimer later claimed that, once a year, as part of Brenda's treatment, the twins would visit Money's clinic, where they were allegedly forced to take part in "sexual rehearsal play"; one of Money's defenders subsequently denied these allegations, suggesting that Brian Reimer - who suffered from schizophrenia - was also a victim of false memory syndrome.

At any event, as a teenager Brenda attempted suicide at least once, and required constant psychiatric treatment. It was not until he reached the age of 14 that his father told him all that had happened to him. He immediately doused his wardrobe with petrol and set fire to it. Within weeks of being told, he opted for a sex change, which necessitated a further five years of surgery before he could function sexually as a male.

When he was 23, by then known as David, he met a single mother of three, Jane Fontane; he married her soon afterwards and adopted her three children. In 2000 he decided to tell his story, collaborating with the journalist John Colapinto in his book *As Nature Made Him: the Boy who was Raised as a Girl*, and later appearing on the Oprah Winfrey Show.

But the marriage did not endure, and further unhappiness followed when Brian took a drugs overdose and died in 2002. The press in Canada reported that David Reimer had recently lost at least \$65,000 in a failed investment.