

Transsexuals Change Capital of the World

EDITOR'S NOTE — To say that Trinidad, Colo., is off the beaten path would be an understatement. But for people who yearn to change from male to female — and occasionally vice versa — it's the center of the United States. That's because Dr. Stanley Biber lives and works there.

By S.J. GUFFEY
Associated Press Writer
TRINIDAD, Colo. (AP) — Dr. Stanley Biber sent away for another surgeon's drawings the first time he changed a man into a woman.

That was a quarter of a century and more than 1,000 transsexuals ago, long before Biber could boast of performing two-thirds of all the sex-change operations in the world.

He does them here in a remote, southern Colorado town of 9,660 people, notably distant from big cities and any major medical research institute.

"It's not a peculiar place to do it," Biber says. "This just happens to be where I live and work."

The straight-lined red brick homes and buildings of Trinidad sit on hillsides above the Purgatoire River, below a sentinel butte called Fletcher's Peak, 100 miles south of Pueblo, the nearest Colorado city.

ONCE A STOP on the Santa Fe Trail, Trinidad later served as a hub for the area's coal mines. Most of the mines are idle today. From any direction Trinidad is an isolated place.

The doctors don't face the worker's psyche and who had prescribed female hormones to get her started toward her womanhood. Biber had a Johns Hopkins University surgeon and his wife, who he used them to finish the social worker's transformation.

More than 1,000 transsexual changes later, fewer than a dozen have been female-to-male operations. There are relatively few such cases among the 5,000-plus files in Biber's office from transsexuals still in the lengthy pre-operative screening process he requires.

MOST TRANSSEXUALS come to Trinidad as women born into male bodies. The female-to-male procedure is more difficult and is still considered experimental.

Biber talks patients about his experiences with what is formally known as "reassignment sex-orientation surgery." Transsexualism remains largely a mystery to the scientific community.

Some believe the condition is genetically determined. Others say gender identities are skewed by early childhood experiences. Biber believes that children are born with their gender "imprinted," and that, sometimes, the imprints don't match the bodies.

Frequently, transsexuals say their earliest memory is of the moment when they realized — sometimes at 3 or 4 — that they were inside the wrong body.

LATER MEMORIES, sometimes decades full of memories, often paint a sad, tortured picture of people trying hard to be what they do not believe they are.

Why not just wear a dress, if that's what makes a person feel best? Wouldn't that suffice for some?

"Transsexuals get this tremendous urge that they are a girl — or boy," Biber explains. It is a driving force, he says, and primarily psychological, not a physical problem.

Before Trinidad, Biber, a native of Iowa, was a MASH surgeon in Korea. He now lives on a ranch outside the town with his wife and those of his seven children still at home.

He came here in the early 1950s because another doctor stationed with him at Fort Carson, Colo., said the town needed a surgeon. Trinidad still needs doctors, Biber says, but its remoteness and the economic downturn since the mines closed, and the hard work required of a small-town physician make it difficult to attract more.

More than anything, Biber is a small-town physician. Sex-change surgery makes up only 1 percent of his work, he says. It seems an important 20 percent, and not only because it

Jenkins beams as she displays her doll collection, curtains and beds and dogs and cats and kittens.

She brings out photos of a first birthday party for "Little One" — the first doll in her collection, the one she was forbidden as a child — and of a dark-haired man from San Francisco who began courting her by phone.

In November, she married her long-distance suitor in a ceremony at her house. She baked her own wedding cake.

"The only wish I have is I'd love to have a little girl. My friends say I'd spoil her terribly, I suppose I would."

Nearly a quarter of those who come to him for surgery en masse, Biber says.

ARJA RESIDENTS don't welcome the label "Sex Change Capital of the World," but there is little of the furor that first accompanied the rumors of what Biber was doing at Mount San Rafael Hospital.

It was 1959, and Biber's first sex-change patient was a social worker who had accompanied various children to the doctor's office over a period of years.

"One day, she came to me and asked me if I'd do her operation," she said she was a transsexual. Biber remembers. "I didn't even know what a transsexual was. She looked completely female to me."

Biber talked with the doctors who had studied the social worker's psyche and who had prescribed female hormones to get her started toward her womanhood. Biber had a Johns Hopkins University surgeon and his wife, who he used them to finish the social worker's transformation.

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subsidizes some of the other medical work he does for free.

"YOU HAVE TO SEE these people and know these people to have empathy with them," he says of transsexuals. "You feel so sorry for them."

When Biber started this, "the moral code is a lot different," he says. "Transsexuals were not recognized by the medical community. Now there is a name for what we see — the 'transsexual syndrome.'"

BIBER DOESN'T LIKE to talk about the local reactions in the first few years. Pressed to remember it, he shrugs.

"You work under adverse conditions if you believe in it," he says at last. "I'm not a religious man but morally, I think we've done these people a tremendous service."

Today, with up to four patients undergoing the surgery weekly, Biber's biggest problem is sorting out who should have it, who should not.

"We have to be very careful to avoid 'schizophrenics,'" says Biber. "We have to be very careful of the extremely feminine homosexual. There's an occasional transvestite who falls into a gray area."

"I've seen so many that I can almost count on my gut feeling when they walk through the door."

THERE IS A MINIMUM requirement of psychological testing, years of cross-dressing and at least that much hormonal treatment before the surgery goes by his gut feeling, and some get turned away.

"But not abruptly," he adds. "I might suggest more counseling, or I might suggest trying something reversible — like breast implants — and seeing how it works for a few months."

The surgery is inexpensive by some standards — \$3,225 for Biber and his team, another \$3,000 for the hospital.

All is paid in advance. Biber does not want it paid for by taxpayers. Some private insurance companies pay, others argue.

"Is there a motivation to go after the money to get this surgery done? That's an excellent test, as far as I'm concerned," the doctor says. "When we make it too easy for these patients, we're going to start getting people who are not good candidates."

When he was made the trek to Trinidad so far include three brothers who became transsexuals, twin brothers turned transsexuals. The oldest was a 74-year-old man who became female and wouldn't become female until his wife died.

They have come from Australia, from South America, from Europe, Africa and Asia. "Almost every country in the world," Biber says.

MARTHA, NOT HER REAL name, underwent surgery at 9 a.m. In less than three hours Biber made her into a woman "who can do anything but have children." She has returned to her job in the East, in an office where she always has been known as a woman.

At 26, she'd been on female hormones for seven years.

Each sex-change operation is slightly different. Some want their noses scaled down, their cheeks made more prominent, the maleness of their adam's apple removed. Sometimes breast implants help the hormones work.

Martha first began "cross-dressing" in women's clothes — at 18. "My mother thought it was a phase I was going through," she says.

She noted that transsexuals, like any other group of people, have different experiences, different backgrounds, different outlooks on life.

Martha returned to her mother, brothers and sisters when she left Trinidad. Their careers, she says, eased into many years of private uncertainty she felt about her sex and herself.

AS GEORGE, she had autism hair. But Anna Louise Jenkins is a blonde now, with curly hair, and carrying a face nearly unlined after 41 years.

"There isn't a girl in the world who doesn't think about being a blonde," she says, laughing.

Blue eye shadow edges her



NEW BODY

Six years ago, Anna Louise Jenkins, seen here in Trinidad, Colo., was George, a married man who worked as a supermarket produce manager. Of her life before her sex change operation she says, "What I went through is something I would never wish on my worst enemy."

AP Newsweek photo

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