

Hermaphrodites who don't know it

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RESPECTING DIVERSITY: Visiting expert Milton Diamond and counsellor Mani Bruce Mitchell, who 'came out' 11 years ago.

People of ambiguous gender are more common than society realises and many do not even know they blur the line between male and female, a visiting expert says.

University of Hawaii professor Milton Diamond said there were one or two intersexual people, also known as hermaphrodites, among every 100 people.

"We're not talking about something alien and from another planet, we're talking about our neighbours and members of our families."

Intersexuality describes a group of conditions that have a blending of the physical features usually considered male or female.

Dr Diamond said only about one in every 2000 to 4000 people actually had ambiguous genitals that combined male and female organs. But intersexual conditions affected people's biology in different ways. For

instance, someone with XY chromosomes, typically associated with males, could be born looking like a female and raised as a girl.

"There are many people who don't know they are intersex."

Dr Diamond has been touring New Zealand talking to counsellors, clinicians, lawyers and parents. His visit was organised by intersex person Mani Bruce Mitchell, of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors.

Mani was raised as a male for her first year till doctors discovered she had a uterus. She was then raised as a female and had surgery at age eight. She "came out" as an intersex person 11 years ago. "Now I embrace my wondrous diversity, which is all my male and femaleness."

Dr Diamond is known for exposing the failure of New Zealand-born sexologist John Money's gender reassignment experiment. Canadian David Reimer, a twin, was raised as a girl called Brenda after his penis was all but lost in a botched circumcision. Dr Money began to publish Brenda's case when she was a child, disguising her as John/Joan. But in an article published in 1997, Dr Diamond and psychiatrist Keith Sigmundson showed how "Brenda" had steadily rejected her reassignment from male to female. At 14, she refused to continue living as a girl.

Reimer killed himself in 2004, having lived the last two decades of his life as a man. His twin brother had earlier killed himself.

Dr Diamond said intersexual children should not be given surgery to "normalise" their appearance as infants. They should be able to decide for themselves which gender they wanted, if they wanted one.

"Parents should certainly not have the right to remove from their child an open future. Yes, you can raise the child as a boy or a girl but you don't have to do surgery - you remove other options from that child."