MALE CIRCUMCISION and HIV prevention have been in the news recently and there is a lot of interest in the subject. Dr Khumo Seipone, Director of HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care at the Ministry of Health, answers the most commonly asked questions about male circumcision.

What is male circumcision?
Male circumcision is the surgical removal of the foreskin covering the end of the penis so that the glans (or knob) is permanently exposed. The foreskin in the male penis does not have any function and there is no biological difference between a circumcised man and a man who is not circumcised.

Is male circumcision a common procedure?
Male circumcision is one of the oldest and commonest surgical procedures in the world. It is done for different religious, cultural, social and medical reasons in different countries. Male circumcision was common in Botswana as part of the bogwera ceremony until the colonial rulers stopped the practice in the early 20th century.

Why are chances of HIV infection lower in a circumcised male?
The inner part of the foreskin contains more cells that are highly susceptible to HIV infection than the rest of the penis. These are the cells with a receptor that allows HIV to enter the body, like a lock with a key. When an uncircumcised man has sex, the receptor cells are exposed, thus putting him at risk of HIV infection if his female partner is positive. By removing the foreskin you reduce the number of these cells on the penis and lower the risk of a man acquiring HIV during sexual intercourse.

Is it scientifically proven that male circumcision can prevent HIV infection?
Medical research has shown beyond any doubt that male circumcision offers partial protection against HIV infection. In 2005, a study in South Africa found that male circumcision reduced the risk of acquiring HIV infection by 60%, and two further studies in Uganda and Kenya achieved similar results. It is important to understand that male circumcision offers only partial protection against HIV infection. In a given act of unprotected sex with an HIV positive woman, a circumcised man has a 60% lower risk of getting infected than an uncircumcised man. However, he can still get HIV so it is still essential that he avoids multiple partners and casual sex and that he uses condoms.