

From the Western Australian newspaper, Perth 11 January 2003:

X Marks the Spot for Intersex Alex

By Julie Butler

A QUIET trailblazer from Perth's Hills has become the first in Australia and probably the world to hold a passport acknowledging that not everyone is male or female. Alex MacFarlane, 48, is intersex and wanted a passport recognising it. Women have a 46XX chromosome mix and men 46XY. Alex is 47XXY, a form of androgyny shared by about one in every 1500 to 2000 babies.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade initially balked, saying its computers could deal only with an F or M in the sex field of passports. For Alex, choosing M or F would have been lying. "I should not have to commit fraud because of a department's production inadequacies," Alex said.

Late last year, after months of correspondence from Alex, and an inquiry from The West Australian, the department had a rethink, deciding to change its passport processing system to allow an X in the sex field. The X signifies unspecified sex or intersex and is the only other sex category allowed under International Civil Aviation Organisation guidelines for machine-readable passports.

A spokeswoman told The West Australian that, after reviewing the issue, the department had decided to accommodate people whose birth certificates recorded their sex as indeterminate. Alex has since received the passport, with an X in the sex field. After making inquiries with intersex people overseas, Alex believes the move set a global precedent.

"It means a great deal," Alex said. "I've been battling with 30-odd years of misrepresentation. It means I can now participate in more of the community." Alex is also believed to be the first Australian issued with a birth certificate acknowledging a gender other than male or female. Alex's says "indeterminate - also known as interse". It was issued in Alex's birth State of Victoria, which unlike WA, changed its policy to allow the category.

Despite all this ground-breaking, Alex shuns the limelight, quietly chipping away at bureaucratic discrimination. "Finding a niche to crawl into has been impossible, so I've made my own," Alex said. "I do not want to change the world, but just the way some of it thinks. Intersex individuals should not have to break the law, by pretending to be male or female, in order to vote, marry, hold a licence, or own property."

Not all 47XXY people identify as androgynous. Some perceive themselves as male or female, and many, like Alex, were surgically altered at birth to appear male or female.

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