

Proponent Testimony of Marie McCausland on Senate Bill 101

Senate Health and Human Services, and Medicaid Committee April 10, 2019

Chairman Burke, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Senate Health, Human Services, and Medicaid Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the importance of Senate Bill 101 and raising awareness for Preeclampsia.

My name is Dr. Marie McCausland. I am currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at Case Western Reserve University studying the “Role for Thymic Stromal Lymphopoietin (TSLP) in the Intestinal Permeability and Mucosal Immune Dysfunction induced by Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) Infection”, or as I like to summarize it “Gut stuff”. When I found out I was pregnant I did what I would do when faced with any new topic: I did my research! I read every book, went to all the classes, and, being the millennial that I am, subscribed to /r/babybumps on Reddit, a news aggregating website. I had no idea that months later I would contribute my own headline “Reddit saved my life-Post Partum Preeclampsia”.

I am a scientist, a mother, and one of the 50,000 women who nearly died due to pregnancy-related complications in 2017.

I had my son, Jeffrey Alexander McCausland, on Mother’s Day in 2017, and it was the most beautiful and perfect gift a mother could ask for. He was, and still is, the light of my life. He also almost killed me.

The day we came home from the hospital, I was completely exhausted, I had a raging headache, I had severe chest pain, I was so bloated I was wearing my husband’s flip-flops, and I just felt “off”. I decided to take my blood pressure and realized that it was high (around 150/95 mm Hg). For reference, a normal blood pressure reading is 120/80 mm Hg. I thought maybe if I took a nap and had some food, I would feel better. However, as I went to lay down, I had this sudden and overwhelming feeling “If I go to sleep, I won’t wake up.”

Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong.

I told my husband I didn’t feel right and we looked for my discharge papers from the hospital. Nothing on my discharge papers described my symptoms. I did, however, remember something I had read a little less than a week earlier on Reddit. It was the first article in the “Lost Mothers” series by NPR/ProPublica and it described the death of a new mother, a NICU nurse with a husband who was a doctor, from Post-Partum Preeclampsia. Post-Partum preeclampsia means that the preeclampsia developed after delivery, and she had the same symptoms I did. I was terrified. I didn’t want to die, too.

So, we bundled up my 4 day old son and went to the nearest Emergency Room, where I was certain they would recognize my classic signs of Preeclampsia. I was wrong. Not only did they not recognize my symptoms, I was actually told “You do not have Preeclampsia.”

As my blood pressure rose to 200/115 mm Hg, I asked my husband to take a picture of me with my little Jeffrey, thinking this may be all he will have of me. I really thought that I would die that day. It wasn't until 10 hours after arriving in the ER, that the on-call Obstetrician from the main hospital was called, and I was immediately transferred and treated for Post-Partum Preeclampsia.

I have no doubt that if I hadn't read an NPR article the day I was induced, I would not be here today. Nothing in the books I read, the classes I went to, or even the discharge instructions after a complicated delivery told me anything about my serious and life-threatening symptoms. Unfortunately, the myth that delivery "cures" preeclampsia is still taught in medical schools and discussed in many online forums. This is despite the fact that, according to the Preeclampsia Foundation, up to 97% of the deaths due to Preeclampsia occur post-partum. I was nearly part of that deadly statistic, and what scares me the most is that the rates of preeclampsia are rising in the United States, rather than falling. We need to reverse this trend.

I will never forget the night, a few weeks after we came back home, when my husband looked over at me while I was breastfeeding our son and started crying. He told me "I'm just so happy you are here," and we cried together as we recognized how close I came to dying. Even today, I still have "survivor moments" where I watch him laughing and smiling at the park and realize I came so close to never even witnessing his first smile, or hearing his beautiful laugh. All this because I happened to read an NPR article, and fought for my life armed with life-saving information about preeclampsia.

I am here to ask for your support of Senate Bill 101, which would designate May Preeclampsia Awareness Month, because I am proof that raising awareness saves lives. When women know the symptoms of preeclampsia, they can recognize it and demand and receive treatment. Since my near-miss, I've worked with my hospital system to make sure this never happens to another woman again by providing resources to new mothers on signs and symptoms which are an emergency, retraining ER staff, and having an OB in on the consult up to 6 weeks post-partum. My experience has turned me into a maternal health advocate and I implore you to recognize the impact even a single news article can have on a new mother in Ohio, let alone an entire month to raise awareness. Thank you for your time.