

HB 248: To Prohibit Required Vaccination Status
Opponent Testimony: Patricia Kellner, MD
Ohio House Health Committee
June 15, 2021

I appreciate the opportunity to provide opponent testimony on House Bill 248. I come to you as a family physician, who sees the job of a family physician as giving people the opportunity to live their life to the fullest, unencumbered by disease or disability or a needlessly shortened life. Vaccines save lives – not only the lives of people vaccinated, but the lives of the people around them. And, they protect people’s quality of life.

I was born in 1955, three years after the worst Polio outbreak in American history: 57,628 cases in one year. Polio left many people paralyzed – in wheelchairs or in bed. It left them unable to breathe on their own, and killed some. Because of Polio, kids’ summer activities were restricted – Polio was spread through swimming pools and through direct kid-to-kid contact. People didn’t want to let their kids go outside. Polio was a scourge. Fortunately for me, Polio vaccine became available the year I was born – and my Mom, along with so many parents, who had seen what Polio could do, eagerly got their kids vaccinated. People in Ohio lined up in droves to get their Polio vaccines on sugar cubes – there was no question then – people knew what Polio looked like and they did not want it.

Rubella vaccine was not licensed until 1971, seven years after a rubella epidemic swept the U.S. that resulted in 12.5 million cases of rubella infection, an estimated 20,000 newborns with Congenital Rubella Syndrome (CRS), and excess fetal and neonatal deaths in the thousands. As with Polio, my Mom had made sure I was vaccinated. When I was a senior in high school in 1973, I had a community experience at a hospital-based pediatric program where kids with developmental delay were evaluated. I saw the spectrum of problems pre-schoolers had to face when they were born to mothers with Rubella: developmental delay, learning disabilities, heart defects, and deafness.

In 1983, when I was an intern, part of my job was to do spinal taps on infants who had been admitted to the hospital with symptoms that made us suspect they had life-threatening bacterial infections. Every 3 days, when it was my turn to admit patients, I did several of these spinal taps. Not every infant turned out to have bacterial meningitis, but those who had meningitis were at risk for losing their vision and/or their hearing as well as having lifelong intellectual impairment. These days, meningitis in infants due to Hemophilus influenza and Pneumococcal bacteria is pretty much a thing of the past.

Not long ago I was thinking about how the anti-vaccine movement is keeping people from getting their kids vaccinated. I wanted to make a video to record the experiences of people who had lived through the era when diseases like Polio were in our communities. People living now haven’t seen what the vaccine-preventable diseases are like. Polio was before my time, so I needed to talk to people of the generation that preceded me – before they’re gone. I had a conversation with a woman who was in her late 90s. She had told me that she had married her high school sweetheart “the love of her life” at 20, had 3 children over the next 3 years, then her husband died, then she remarried and went on with life. I stopped her. “What happened to your first husband that he died so young?” It turned out a wave a polio had swept through her community – and not only had he died, but she said all the women who were pregnant at the time died. Just like Rubella, getting Polio during pregnancy is even more serious. The woman I spoke to died before I was able to record her story, but please hear it through me.

As a physician, I can only say there is no higher calling than saving lives. As we've all learned in the past year, vaccines don't provide 100% protection. Vaccines do save lives – it could be your life, your spouse's life, or your children or grandchildren's life. But they only work if we give the shots, promote vaccine uptake and make vaccines accessible. Scientists do the work of developing vaccines and brave citizens participate in research trials to assess their effectiveness and safety. You, as legislators must support this work with legislation and funding – it's your job to save lives too.

Thank you for your consideration of my thoughts, and once again, I urge the committee to reject HB 248 to keep Ohioans safe and avoid dangerous consequences for our state.