

Testimony of Catherine Romanos, MD

In OPPOSITION of House Bill 248

Submitted to the Committee of Health

June 15, 2021

I am a family physician who lives and works in Columbus, Ohio. I completed a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish literature at New York University (I am fluent in Spanish), received my medical degree from the University of Connecticut, and completed a residency in family medicine with an emphasis on social justice and caring for underserved Spanish-speaking patients Lawrence, Massachusetts. I am board certified in family medicine. I am a Board Member of the Physicians Action Network, the President-elect of the Columbus Medical Association, and a Past-President of the Central Ohio Academy of Family Physicians.

As a physician, I want to convey to you the vital importance of opposing House Bill (HB) 248. This bill is NOT about public health and safety but in fact flies in the face of public health recommendations.

Every time I think about the importance of vaccines, my mind goes back to a family I cared for during my residency training. A mother of 3, I'll call her Jane*, was 20 weeks pregnant with her fourth child. Her children had not been appropriately vaccinated and while she was pregnant, one of the children came down with the chicken pox. Now many of us in this room have had the chicken pox and remember it as an annoying but benign illness. We forget, however, that chickenpox is not only deadly in its own right, but it is very dangerous for a developing fetus. If a woman contracts chickenpox during pregnancy the fetus is at risk for congenital varicella, being born with birth defects.

Currently we do not have an effective way of treating pregnant women with chickenpox, or protecting the fetus. Jane's pregnancy was complicated and stressful. The most heartbreaking part is that these complications and stresses could have been prevented with vaccines.

So when we talk about vaccines, we are not just talking about the individuals being pricked by the needle in the doctor's office. We are talking about population health. We are looking out for pregnant women like Jane and her 4 children. We are thinking about people whose bodies cannot protect them from illness the ways healthy bodies can. In order to protect these vulnerable individuals we not only need to encourage them to choose vaccination, but also know who is vaccinated.

As a family physician, I value the relationships that I have with my patients. I put equal value on that relationship as I do on their individual and bodily autonomy. It is a privilege to have the opportunity to talk with patients about decisions they make for themselves and their families. However, I have a responsibility not only to the autonomy of each individual patient but to the public health of my community. It is not my job to make decisions for my patients. It is my job to listen to their concerns and offer evidence-based information that might help to inform their decisions. I am deeply concerned about the population risk of unvaccinated individuals and the risk they accept for their own health and the health of those around them. This bill limits the ability of my public health community to know who is at risk and of what.

Finally, Ohio does not force any person to receive a vaccine if they do not choose to do so. We do however, need to have the ability to know who is vaccinated and keep records of the prevalence of vaccines in our community. There is a lot of talk about fake

news and real facts these days. The evidence on immunizations is not weak. The benefits of immunizations are irrefutable and any healthcare provider that tells you otherwise is practicing very far outside of mainstream medicine. It is critical to the lives and health of women, children, and families in Ohio that you oppose HB 248.