

Alexandra Fontaine

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Hello, Chair Lipps, Vice Chair Stewart, and members of the House Public Health Policy Committee,

My name is Alexandra Fontaine, and I am a third year medical student in Ohio, and today I have the great honor of speaking in support of House Bill 89. On my very first day of my first rotation in medical school, I was faced with an ethical dilemma that no lecture could prepare me for. I was asked by my superior to perform a bimanual pelvic exam on an already anesthetized patient. I had never met the patient while she was awake, nor had I asked her permission to perform such an intimate exam. She didn't even know I would be in the room during her surgery. This exam was not required for the successful completion of her surgery. In short, there was no medical indication for me, who was essentially a stranger to this woman, to perform a pelvic exam on her. There was, however, an indication for me to uphold the oath I took to protect her autonomy -- to ensure that I did not violate her privacy for the sake of my learning.

In what other institution in society is the value of one's education upheld by the justification that these egregious acts are "good for learning"? There is no other profession where asking professional learners to complete educational tasks tantamount to sexual violation is acceptable. Others' autonomy and well-being is more important than my education.

The irony of this practice is that unconsented pelvic exams are not even beneficial learning experiences for medical students. Understanding the anatomy of these exams is not too difficult. The real learning is performing these intimate exams while ensuring the patients are comfortable and cared for and do not feel violated. There is no opportunity to do this if patients are anesthetized, rendering the practice nearly useless. This is an utterly inefficient way to learn. But this rationale pales in comparison to the importance of maintaining a patient's autonomy.

Unconsented pelvic exams are happening, here, right now, in Ohio at the hospitals we all rely on for health care. People with the most power in the healthcare hierarchy are asking the people with the least power to carry out these exams, rendering students almost incapable of saying "no". We need the law to support us. Medicine has been unable to self-govern this practice, and we need the government to step in and help us protect our patients. I am asking you, as a woman, as a medical student and soon-to-be pediatrician, to help me protect my patients and restore the value of consent in our profession. The integrity of the medical community in Ohio relies on your support of HB 89.