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ANOTHER VOICE | HEALTH CARE

Another Voice: Maternal Health, Dignity, and Consent Act would ensure more patients seek care

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As an obstetrician-gynecologist in Western New York, I've seen the maternal health crisis unfold in real time. Federal funding cuts are stripping maternal health services from our region. Statewide, the maternal mortality rate is 18.5 per 100,000 births – but in Western New York, the numbers are worse.

In Monroe County, maternal mortality reaches 29.7 per 100,000 births and in Erie County, maternal mortality reaches 35.7 per 100,000 births. Black families are at even higher risk, facing pregnancy-related death at five times the rate of their white counterparts.

At the same time, continued breaches of provider-patient trust are compounding this crisis. Trust is the foundation of medicine, but under current practice, that trust is being violated.

From the earliest stages of medical training, clinicians are taught to drug test and screen reflexively, even when tests are medically unnecessary and performed without explicit patient consent. This secret testing violates patients' bodily autonomy – leaving people wondering why they were tested, when they were tested, and what it means. It deters patients from seeking prenatal and postpartum care and disproportionately harms people of color.

Passing the Maternal Health, Dignity, and Consent Act would ensure patients understand and consent to their care – safeguarding bodily autonomy and protecting their trust in healthcare.

In 2020, New York City's Health + Hospitals system began requiring informed consent – resulting in stronger provider-patient relationships with no negative impact on child safety.

Once informed consent for drug testing became embedded in my own department's culture, I saw a profound shift. Patients are more open and trusting, allowing us to provide compassionate, evidence-based care.

Change has been slow and uneven across the state. This legislation would ensure informed consent is the standard everywhere, no matter where you are in the state.

We need policies that reinforce the trust at the heart of medical care. Passing the Maternal Health, Dignity, and Consent Act is a meaningful step toward ensuring pregnant patients seek care when they need it most – protecting people and saving lives.

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