

Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing:
The Continued Assault on Reproductive Freedoms in a Post-Dobbs America
March 20, 2024

Testimony of Dr. Austin Dennard

Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Graham, and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, thank you for having me here today.

My name is Austin Dennard. I'm a mother, Texan and practicing obgyn. I'm here today to describe what life has been like in Texas since the federal right to abortion was taken away by the Supreme Court and my home state began criminalizing and banning abortion care.

Nothing brings me more joy than being a mother to my three young children. But a close second is being an obstetrician/gynecologist. I get to be present for so many incredible moments. There's nothing quite like the moment a baby is born and a family is created; to this day it still takes my breath away.

But intertwined in these celebrations are also moments of complete heartbreak: pregnancy loss, a devastating diagnosis, infertility. Since SB8 was enacted and the Dobbs decision came down in 2022, those tough moments have become even more tragic. In Texas, where my husband and I both practice medicine, we live in fear, as physicians and patients.

I can speak to both of those perspectives because I am a Texan and obgyn who needed an abortion but couldn't get one in my home state.

In the summer of 2022, SB8 had come into effect in Texas. After careful consideration and many prayers, my husband and I were delighted to find out that we were pregnant again. Between our two toddlers and our growing surgical practices, we were feeling really busy but also very blessed.

But at 11 weeks of pregnancy, I had a routine ultrasound that would change the course of my family's life forever. The brain and skull had not formed. A condition known as anencephaly. The most severe neural tube diagnosis. One-hundred-percent fatal.

I will never forget looking up at the ultrasound screen in complete disbelief and utter devastation. This was not going to be a little brother or sister for my children. I needed an abortion but would need to flee my state to get one. Texas; my state. Where my family has lived for 6 generations. Where I practice medicine and am raising my family.

My mind began to spin: *Where would I go? Who would take care of me? Who will take care of my children? What about my patients? What if this is the last time I ever get to be pregnant?*

Because of Texas's new laws, we were afraid to use credit cards or to tell people why we were traveling to the East Coast so suddenly. We were terrified that my husband could be arrested for "aiding and abetting" my abortion – just for traveling with me. Under Texas's new laws, the penalties are severe: up to 100 years in prison, huge fines and loss of medical license. We were absolutely humiliated.

We flew to the East Coast for a 10-minute procedure. Standard medical care. Healthcare.

Through it all, I felt so broken and abandoned by my home state, and at the same time I had never seen my own luck and privilege with more clarity. What did other people do in this situation without the medical connections and the means to cover extensive costs and lost wages? Why should anyone in the United States have to be lucky or privileged to access essential medical care?

As heartbreaking and traumatizing as that was for me, it is even more disturbing to be a working obgyn in Texas today, trying to abide by these paralyzing and punitive laws while still providing timely, compassionate and ethical care to our patients.

Conversations in the office are different now. Couples arrive for their pregnancy confirmation visits more filled with worry than with joy. They know how much is at stake now. *What if it is an ectopic pregnancy? What if I start bleeding? What if I become really sick?*

I have the same answer for all of them: I will do everything in my power to keep you safe.

But the truth is, the ramifications of a fatal fetal diagnosis or medically complicated pregnancy feel enormous in this new environment. We all collectively hold our breath as we pass pregnancy milestones, awaiting genetic screening results, anatomy scans, and those fragile weeks of peri viability.

Because my patients know that lawmakers have stripped away their rights. Their rights to make decisions about our own health, their own body and their own family. So long as they remain on Texas soil, their pregnancies belong to the state. Until their babies are safely swaddled in their arms, we have no say. Exceptions are said to exist in the laws but in reality, they are only a fiction.

These bans have stolen so much from all of us. I have spent the greater part of my adult life dedicated to studying medicine and becoming the best doctor I know how to be – yet somehow lawmakers have taken control of my body and my practice as if they know better.

I have never wanted to be a public person, but I can't be silent anymore. The silence is too painful. These cruel laws and the harm they cause my patients and my profession, must change. Texas women deserve better. Americans deserve better. My 4 year old daughter deserves better.

Mornings in our household start quite early these days. And for me, there is no sweeter way to wake up than to the sounds of our little ones. Their sweet voices can be heard through our bedroom wall. It is not long before I hear their giggles migrating to the nursery where I usually find the toddlers cuddled in the crib with their baby brother.

I think about how blessed we are; my three healthy children are here because of the excellent medical care I received. But I also think about how fragile it all is, how easily things could have ended differently – all because of the dangerous and cruel obstacles my state has inflicted on us and others like us who just want to build a family.

Thank you.