

Reactions to the Testimony on Parental Notification HF 352

I was one of those who testified in favor of parental notification (HF 352) on 3/3/04 at the House Health and Human Services Committee hearings. I was very impressed by the testimony from Professor Collett, Evelyn Eubanks and the three very brave young ladies. I thought that the other side would have to slink away and either lick their wounds or – perish the thought – actually consider that they might have been wrong!

The testimony that followed, against the bill, was disturbing for a number of reasons. I know one of those who testified, Dr. Charles Oberg, who acknowledged Professor Collett and the girls but then, with a straight face, stated that we had not heard a pediatric perspective yet. (Hello, Chuck! Well, apparently I don't count because resigned from his organization over policy differences and I don't provide "real pediatric care" because I don't prescribe birth control.)

Dr. Oberg and the others were obviously prepared for what were going to say because they all affirmed that they agreed with the importance of parents every bit as much as we did. Further, they all said that when seeing a teen alone, they always tried to get the parents involved and were almost always successful, with maybe 2 –3 exceptions in their entire career. They indicated that this was the standard of care and ought to be the case for all the other doctors out there seeing teens without their parents. I find it all – to put it as kindly as possible -- hard to believe. It was not the experience of the three young ladies who testified! Are they the exceptions?

I have seen the training and continuing education that pediatricians get and that is NOT the emphasis. Rather, there is a tendency to quickly assume that the parents will be unhelpful or even abusive. I had one girl of about 16 in my practice who ran away because her parents did not approve of her boyfriend. Health and social service professionals got her declared emancipated because they found out that the family believed in corporal punishment (although the girl had not been punished for this incident.) She moved in with the boyfriend who had a criminal record.

Is the perspective of the average mainstream pediatrician the same as the parents? Not that I have seen. A number of years ago I was at the "Advances in Pediatrics" Continuing Education conference at the University of Minnesota. One of the break-out sessions was lead by the then head of Teen Age Medical Service. He gave some scenarios for discussion. One was this: "A 16 year old girl comes in saying that she had her first sexual experience. What do you do?"

People began saying what tests and birth control methods should be ordered. No one said anything about involving the parents. Then I raised my hand and said that I would ask more questions, like, "How do you feel about the experience? Does the boy talk to you?" I have found that a girl in that situation often feels misused, ashamed, angry, depressed and remorseful. Often the boy has abandoned them. She is ready to reconsider but the doctor assumes that she is now "in the club" and could not possible stop. I would say, "You feel the way you do because this is not the way it is supposed to be. Sex is

intended to go with exclusive commitment and you can change and go that way from now on.”

At that point I was interrupted by several participants with, “We don’t want to hear about your personal agenda. We came to hear the expert.” Interestingly, years later, when that doctor was giving a presentation on incurable sexually transmitted diseases, I asked during the response time, “Doesn’t it make you wish they had waited until they were committed to one partner for life?” He paused and then said, “Yes, but when they get to me they are pretty far down the road.”

Even those who buy into the misguided program to provide teens with non-judgmental care occasionally have regrets. Let’s not lose another generation of young people by following a failed philosophy

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