

September 4, 2015

Hal Lawrence, III, MD, Executive Vice President & CEO  
Mark DeFrancesco, MD, President  
Thomas Gellhaus, MD, President-Elect  
American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists  
P.O. Box 70620  
Washington, DC 20024-9998

Dear Dr. Lawrence, Dr. DeFrancesco, and Dr. Gellhaus:

We write on behalf of the thousands of women and families represented by Improving Birth, the national consumer movement to improve maternity care in the U.S. As you may recall, Improving Birth represented pregnant and birthing women in a meeting with ACOG leadership this past May. During that meeting, we were pleased to hear of your objectives regarding recognizing women as the decision-makers in their maternity care, as well as ACOG's move toward more collaborative relationships among the various maternal health care providers. It is exciting to see that we share these common goals.

On the heels of the anonymous essay published recently in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* about abuse of women receiving reproductive health care from obstetrician/gynecologists, we are writing today to touch back on an extremely important topic we discussed at our May meeting: an alarming--and alarmingly frequent--stream of consumer feedback to Improving Birth about instances of disrespect, misinformation, and abuse at the hands of maternity care providers. We are deeply concerned by the daily reports we hear from women about failures of physicians and hospitals to provide informed consent and to honor informed refusal, as well as the use of coercive and bullying tactics to gain consent for procedures declined by the mother. In just the last four years, several organizations have sprung up to address these issues--Improving Birth, Human Rights in Childbirth, and the Birth Rights Bar Association--all of whom have endorsed, on behalf of U.S. women, the World Health Organization's statement *Prevention and elimination of disrespect and abuse during facility-based childbirth*.

These reports from women are critical to public health not least because they shed light upon the statistics that are so concerning to us all at a population level--- high and variable Cesarean rates, low and variable VBAC rates, and the continued popularity of episiotomy in some facilities, among other measures. The presumption that women are willingly accepting greater health risks by consenting to unnecessary or contra-indicated procedures makes sense only when we recognize the fact that too many women are not being given full and accurate information, and often, they are not even given a choice in their care. We can confirm that both of these things are happening around the country, and they are resulting in emotional and physical trauma and other negative maternal health impacts. Further, many consumers report that experience with or awareness of subpar and/or abusive hospital maternity care was an important factor in their subsequent decision to give birth outside of hospitals, whether or not out-of-hospital birth was integrated into the overall health care community.

Unfortunately, there does not seem to be any effective or meaningful system of accountability regarding such mistreatment in maternity care. Our volunteers around the country and the women who contact us regularly report that complaints made to hospitals are routinely ignored or justified as mere communication lapses, while responses from state licensing boards are glacially slow and investigations, if they are conducted, take place behind closed doors. Litigation is a last resort, but is a blunt and slow-moving tool, inaccessible for most women, although the existence of groups like Human Rights in Childbirth and the Birth Rights Bar Association network means we have been able to steer several women to attorneys recently. In sum, no one is in charge of protecting women in their maternity care, and women are losing trust in the industry.

In light of this lack of oversight or regulation, we are appealing to you to join us as allies, to help spur corrective action. ACOG's excellent ethics committee opinions on informed consent and use of force against women in maternity care are explicit regarding pregnant women's rights with respect to care providers. We ask that ACOG honor the women its members serve by joining us to address and eliminate all such unethical conduct among its members.

Building on last year's viral "Break the Silence" campaign about mistreatment of women in their maternity care ([bit.ly/breakthesilencephoto](http://bit.ly/breakthesilencephoto)), this year's national Rally to Improve Birth features the theme of "Respectful Care." In all U.S. rally locations this Labor Day week, we will be addressing the media and the public about the need for more respectful maternity care, including, importantly, making women's rights to informed consent and informed refusal a reality in all aspects of their reproductive health care.

We hope these public demonstrations will help move the conversation forward, and we would like to extend an invitation to your organization and members to be a part of the conversation that is happening around the country. Women want to trust their doctors, but doctors must be worthy of that trust. How can we work together to ensure that happens?

Thank you for your attention to this issue, and we look forward to hearing from you soon to talk about how consumers and physicians can collaborate to make maternity care safer for women. We know there is so much we can achieve together.

Respectfully,




---

Dawn Thompson  
President, Board of Directors



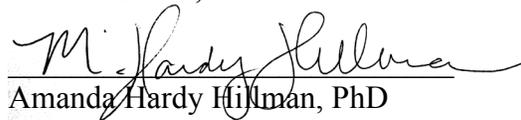

---

Heather Thompson, PhD  
Secretary, Board of Directors




---

Cristen Pascucci  
Vice President, Board of Directors




---

Amanda Hardy Hillman, PhD  
Member, Board of Directors

cc: Christine Laine, MD, MPH, Editor in Chief, *Annals of Internal Medicine*  
Hermine Hayes Klein, Founder, Human Rights in Childbirth  
Indra Lusero, President, Birth Rights Bar Association