

March 31, 2011-SB 72 (Late term abortion-exclude mental health) Cathy McDaniels Wilson, Ph.D.

Testimony to Link to:

Dr. Cathy McDaniels Wilson presented as an “interested party” before the Senate Health, Human Services, and Aging Committee

SB 72

March 31, 2011

Good Afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. My name is Dr. Cathy McDaniels Wilson. I am a licensed clinical psychologist in the state of Ohio. I am the Past President of the Ohio Psychological Association and a member of the American Psychological Association. I am a practicing clinical psychologist and a Professor in the Department of Psychology at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. I am speaking to you on behalf of the millions of Americans who suffer from mental illness. Today, I am speaking, as an interested party, about the one in five Americans who suffer from some diagnosable mental condition each year.

The burden of mental illness on health and productivity in the United States has been profoundly misunderstood. Data developed by the massive Global Burden of Disease study conducted by the World Health Organization revealed that mental illness, including suicide, ranks second in the burden of diseases (Cardiovascular disease 18.6% and mental illness 15.4%, respectively).

So, what is mental illness? Mental illness refers to all diagnosable mental disorders. Mental disorders are health conditions characterized by alterations in thinking, mood, and behavior that are associated with marked levels of distress and/or impaired functioning. Mental health providers utilize systems which describe criteria for diagnosis and structured guidelines that help inform us of key clinical features and symptom presentation.

This is very different from what are sometimes called “mental health problems.” These are signs and symptoms of insufficient intensity or duration to meet the criteria for a mental disorder. For example, many of us may experience strong emotional reactions or mental health *problems* when we suffer the loss of a pet or receive a poor performance evaluation. However, most of us are able to bounce back from these experiences, which are not examples of mental *illness*.

The field of psychoneuroimmunology has witnessed an explosion of empirical findings in the last two decades. It is becoming more and more clear that the mind can influence the disease process of viral infections, cancer, and wound healing, just to name a few. We now know that life circumstances and stressful life events can impact the physical body. A well-accepted and contemporary scientific perspective is that the mind and the body are inseparable in understanding many aspects of health and illness.

My goal here today is to inform, as well as to increase sensitivity toward, and awareness of, the complexities of mental illness and the nature of the mind-body connection.

How does this relate to the current issue at hand? The question has arisen: “**Does Abortion cause harm to women’s mental health?**” This question turns out to be harder to answer definitively than one might expect. Women obtain abortions for different reasons, at different times of gestation, via different medical procedures and within different personal, social, economic, and cultural contexts. Each of these factors can play a significant role in how a woman responds psychologically after an abortion – including how effective the response and whether it reaches the level of mental illness.

In general, solid psychological research and clinical experience demonstrate that some women do experience sadness, grief, and a feeling of loss following the termination of a pregnancy. Further, some women do experience clinically significant disorders, including depression and anxiety. However, when we consider the more specific question of whether women respond differently to abortions because they are elective or not, no clear scientific nor clinical consensus emerges. The diversity and complexity regarding women and the circumstances involved in having an abortion do not permit a conclusive statement about the psychological impact of abortion. It is simply not the case that abortion, whether induced or elective, always or usually causes women who choose to abort to suffer significant adverse psychological aftereffects.

I am more than happy to answer any questions that you may have.