

UPDATE | February 7, 2018

Meet Our Advocates: Dr. Lauren Owens

Where are you from?

Bismarck, North Dakota.

What's your specialty or area of expertise?

I'm an obstetrician/gynecologist, and although I practice full-spectrum ob/gyn, I have extra training in contraception and abortion.



What first inspired you to become a doctor?

As a Peace Corps Volunteer, I did community and school-based health education. Talking with my students about reproductive health was really fun—who doesn't love talking to classrooms of young people about sex? However, as much as we all got out of the discussions, I saw that the knowledge, although necessary, was insufficient; they

needed access to respectful, skilled reproductive health care services. The fork in the road for people's lives based on their access to health care was clear, and the path without access was devastating. I wanted to continue doing health education work but add the ability to provide health care. For me, that meant going to medical school and getting a master's in public health.

What story about one of your patients most sticks with you?

I took care of a patient who had terrible luck; two wanted pregnancies with unrelated, serious issues in less than two years. Her second pregnancy's issue was discovered at the ultrasound we use to look at all the fetus's anatomy and screen for any visible problems. This fetus would not survive more than a few hours after birth. Because the anatomy ultrasound needs to be done at a point in the pregnancy where all the organs we evaluate have developed, women are commonly at about 20 weeks pregnant at this time. Because our state doesn't have a 20-week abortion ban, we were able to help her end her pregnancy. Her abortion was safer for her by far than continuing the pregnancy. I felt terrible for her to have lost two wanted pregnancies in two years, but I was grateful to have been part of her access to safe, timely abortion care. I really hope she and her family have better things ahead for them.

What current policy issue especially motivates you to be an advocate?

Although it didn't pass out of the Senate, the fact that a 20-week abortion ban made it through the House is astounding to me. This bill flew in the face of *Roe*, willfully ignored the evidence that fetuses cannot yet feel pain at that point in pregnancy, and demonstrated massive ignorance of obstetric care. As with my patient's case above, sometimes serious issues with a pregnancy may not be discovered until an ultrasound, right around 20 weeks. It's nothing less than misogyny to deny women the access to abortion care, for any of the reasons that patients need to have abortion care later in pregnancy, on the basis of disproven assertions. The bill may have died, but its existence tells us the sad truth: many of our elected officials are willing to ignore science to control women and limit their reproductive choices.

Who is your social justice hero?

People working within and outside the public health system to improve health for people with substance use disorder are heroes I've come across in my research in the intersection of reproductive health and substance use disorder. The stigma associated with substance use disorder is profound. That stigma is multiplied for women and multiplied again for pregnant women. As we know from Tennessee, criminalizing pregnant women for substance use just leads to avoidance of prenatal care and out-of-hospital deliveries. We know tens of thousands of people are dying every year because of overdoses, but our government doesn't consider that worthy of declaring a state of emergency and devoting more funding to saving lives. I'm grateful for the heroes I see staffing syringe exchanges and working through NGOs to support the health of people with substance use disorders through harm reduction, not criminalization.

Every week, our Meet Our Advocates series showcases the talents and passion of one of our doctors and finds out, in their own words, what inspires them to be physician-advocates. Lauren Owens, MD, MPH, is a member of the Leadership Training Academy Class of 2018.

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