

I am writing in support of HB 479, the Montana Unborn Child Pain and Suffering Prevention Act.

As both a Neonatologist who cares for vulnerable preterm infants born as early as 23 weeks gestation, and a Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrician who monitors the long term effects of medical interventions on the fetus and neonate, I have witnessed the evolution in our understanding of the extremely preterm infant's perception of pain. Early in my career I witnessed extremely preterm infants suffering through painful procedures without anesthesia, due to the perception that preterm infants did not feel pain. I then saw, in these same infants, the long term effects of this early and profound overstimulation of their developing nervous system's pain centers.

Fortunately, we have learned a great deal about the development of the human nervous system over the past 2 decades. We now understand that the somatosensory system...the part of our nervous system that senses touch, pressure, hot and cold, and most importantly pain...has already developed by 20 weeks of gestation. We have also learned that infants cared for in the NICU as early as 23 weeks are actually so sensitive to pain that they easily become OVER stimulated by painful experiences, which can result in significant long term effects.

At any viable age, whether still a fetus, or born too soon, an infant perceives pain. With this awareness, we provide even our tiniest, most vulnerable patients with anesthesia for any painful procedure. And knowing this, it seems inhumane to perform any painful procedure on a fetus or neonate at 20 weeks or more without appropriate anesthesia.

Thank you for considering HB 479.

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