

THE TENNESSEAN

CONTRIBUTORS | Opinion *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Hospitals for teens with gender dysphoria shouldn't be political battlegrounds | Opinion

I have questions about what age appropriate healthcare looks like for young people with gender dysphoria, but politicians should not be the ones making these decisions for teens and their parents.

Anna Caudill Guest Columnist

Published 2:12 p.m. CT Oct. 31, 2022 | Updated 2:13 p.m. CT Oct. 31, 2022

Key Points

Anna Caudill is executive director of Post Adoption Learning Services, a member of the Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates, and mother to two children with disabilities.

When our church community helped us adopt two disabled young boys, I had no idea how hard parenting would be.

I was unprepared for the crushing helpless feeling every time a doctor said one of them needed surgery. I told adoption advocate Mary Beth Chapman more than once that if we could see around the bend in the road, we'd be afraid to go on.

More than once, our Sunday School class prayed us through, reminding me that we were never alone but seen and loved. The rare vacation was always within a half hour of a strong children's hospital, just in case. We joked that the Ronald McDonald House was our summer home.

We persevered, in no small part thanks to the dedicated child life specialists, pediatric nurses, and physicians of children's hospitals. Because of them, my children are not afraid when they head into a hospital for annual ultrasounds or lab work. My sons trust that when they enter a children's hospital, they are safe.

That's why I cannot understand why any elected official would ever try to put Vanderbilt University Medical Center patients or physicians in danger.

Hear more Tennessee Voices:*Get the weekly opinion newsletter for insightful and thought provoking columns.*

'Intentional campaign of disinformation' harms children

Several Tennessee officials recently joined forces regarding claims that VUMC's does genital reassignment surgeries on young children without parental consent, a claim the hospital says is untrue. Before Vanderbilt confirmed to legislators that they have treated an average of five patients a year since 2018, none younger than 16 and none involving genital alteration, U.S. Sen. Marsha Blackburn joined Tennessee's GOP leadership to echo these claims.

Setting aside how many patients that is, their ages, or how Vanderbilt could guarantee payment for surgeries performed on minors without parental consent — there is the very real issue of the danger these lies can cause.

A similar campaign was focused against Boston Children's Hospital recently. After weeks of the same kind of lies as the ones that have been brought against Vanderbilt, a Massachusetts woman called in a bomb threat, resulting in a lockdown of that clinic along with the entire Children's Hospital campus.

Within days, the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Medical Association, and Children's Hospital Association—Vanderbilt Children's is a member — sent a joint statement begging the Department of Justice for protection from “coordinated attacks...rooted in an intentional campaign of disinformation...resulting in a rapid escalation of threats, harassment, and disruption of care.”

Sign up for Latino Tennessee Voices newsletter:*Read compelling stories for and with the Latino community in Tennessee.*

A hospital lockdown is terrifying

The helpless feeling of watching my child in pain is nothing compared to a hospital lockdown. In 2012, the summer my then 7-year-old lay in traction for 46 days following a grueling pelvic reconstruction, a woman became violent in the dead of night. At 2 in the morning I was jolted awake by the lockdown announcement, and police rushed past our room.

I drew the shades. My son slept on, his legs held straight by weights hanging from the bed's edge. I'd topped each of the pins holding his pelvis together with a tiny eraser in the shape of a Disney character so they wouldn't seem so scary to him. More police filed past. I wedged a

chair against the door and tried to gauge whether I could disconnect the hospital bed and squeeze it into the patient bathroom. Would it buy a few more minutes of life? Would it matter? Had we gone through six weeks of hell, with a daily care regimen that sent my baby screaming, to die like this?

Gov. Bill Lee, Senator Blackburn and state Sen. Jack Johnson, and Rep. William Lamberth know what happened to Boston Children's Hospital. They're experienced enough to know there were children terrified in their hospital rooms that day, chemo that was postponed and ambulances that were diverted elsewhere. They know this is no responsible way to represent Tennesseans or the children who come from all over the world for care at one of America's top ten pediatric hospitals.

Sign up for Black Tennessee Voices newsletter: *Read compelling columns by Black writers from across Tennessee.*

Politicians shouldn't make health care decisions for parents

There is nothing helpful, moral, or remotely Christian about knowingly endangering over 100,000 children's lives this year to debate the healthcare choices of five patients. What is the end goal of disrupting the relationship between disabled and sick children and healthcare providers?

Children's hospitals are not a political battleground.

Even though I have questions about what age appropriate healthcare looks like for young people with gender dysphoria, I know without a doubt that politicians should not be the ones making these life altering decisions for teens and their parents.

I also know children who don't have gender dysphoria but do have other conditions requiring gender-affirming treatment.

And as a Christian and a mother to two boys whose lives depend on safe hospitals, I know we can and should have these conversations without resorting to lies and terrorizing children and doctors.

I expect my elected officials to keep children safe from domestic terror threats, not to provoke them for the sake of winning a midterm election.

Anna Caudill is executive director of Post Adoption Learning Services, a member of the Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates, and mother to two children with disabilities. She

was named a 2013 Angel in Adoption by the Congressional Coalition on Adoption.