

Statement of Carol Blocker
Founder of the Melanie Blocker Stokes Foundation
May 1, 2007

Good Afternoon Chairman Pallone, Ranking Member Deal, Congressman Rush and members of the subcommittee.

My name is Carol Blocker, and I am the mother of Melanie Blocker Stokes, the proud grandmother of Sommer Skyy, and an advocate for all women-mothers-and grandmothers throughout this country who have suffered from postpartum depression.

Melanie Blocker Stokes, the inspiration for Congressman Rush's postpartum depression bill, took her life on June 11, 2001, less than 5 months after giving birth to her first daughter, my grandchild, Sommer Skyy.

Today, 6 years after the introduction of this bill, Melanie and hundreds of thousands of women, who have suffered from postpartum depression and psychosis are still waiting for Congress to ACT.

We want justice Mr. Chairman, and that is why I ask for the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health to immediately pass H.R. 20, the Melanie Blocker Stokes Postpartum Depression Research and Care Act.

Congressman Rush has truly championed this cause and I commend him for honoring my daughter's life and legacy through this legislation.

I also want to thank EVERY democratic member of this Subcommittee for co-sponsoring H.R. 20—and thank the Republican Ranking Member,

Congressman Deal. H.R. 20 has over 100 cosponsors, demonstrating it is not a POLITICAL issue—it's a public health crisis.

Many of you may recall my daughter's story from my September 2004 testimony; however, it bears repeating.

My daughter, Melanie, was born and raised in the city of Chicago. As both a child and an adult, she was beautiful, accomplished, and the light of my life.

We educated her at St. George private school in Hyde Park; she went to the Immaculata High School in Chicago, and Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. After she completed Spelman College, Melanie returned home to Chicago and went to work for Astra Zeneca Pharmaceutical Company, where she rose to become a sales manager, and she married Doctor Sam Stokes.

Sam and Melanie were so happy in their marriage and their lives together. They were even happier when they learned, in 2000, that a child was on the way. The whole family, Sam's family and ours, were ecstatic when my granddaughter--who Melanie named Sommer Skyy--was born on February 23, 2001.

My daughter's pregnancy was normal.

But, 6 weeks after Melanie gave birth, at the routine postpartum checkup, she said that she felt "hopeless" and she retreated to her room. We couldn't get her to go back to the doctor, or back to her job, or back into the world.

One day I found Melanie in her bedroom and she was hollow-eyed and gaunt, and she was rocking in her glider. Her lips and her tongue were peeling from malnutrition, because Melanie was not eating or sleeping.

When I went to her bathroom to get her a cold towel, I found a butcher's knife, and I asked Melanie, I said, "What are you doing with this?" She looked at me and said she didn't know, but she thought she was going to have to die.

At that moment, I knew that something was very, very wrong with Melanie and I called her doctor. Her doctor said she was suffering from postpartum depression.

Over the next 7 weeks Melanie was hospitalized three times, and each time the doctors prescribed different combinations of anti-depression, anti-anxiety and anti-psychotic medications, but Melanie's depression had deepened to the point that she wouldn't or couldn't take the pills.

She talked about suicide and looked for ways to harm herself. Once she even asked her brother to buy her a gun.

Another time she took the screens out of my high-rise apartment windows while visiting me.

And another time we found that she had snuck away from her home and tried to drown herself in Lake Michigan. Each time we went back to the doctor, and each time there were more prescriptions and more assumptions, but we never heard the words postpartum psychosis.

When Melanie came home after her third stay in the hospital she seemed to be a bit better, but I was still worried, and my fears were founded.

On the night before Melanie's disappearance, I told her husband Sam, "Don't you let her out of your sight." But Sam had to leave for a meeting the next morning, and when he left the apartment Melanie fled. The day was June 10, 2001, less than 6 months after Sommer Skyy was born.

We searched Chicago looking for her all weekend. We posted flyers and Sam went on the local television news, pleading, "Melanie, please come home. I need you. Your baby needs you." But Melanie didn't answer.

While we searched, Melanie went to a hotel in Chicago and checked into a room on the twelfth floor. She then wrote six suicide notes. The notes included one to God and one to Sam, and all six of them were lined up on the night stand in her room. We found them after she died.

On June 11, 2001, as the sun rose over Lake Michigan, my beautiful daughter stepped out of a twelfth floor window to her death.

And I think my heart died that day.

After hearing my daughter's story, Congressman Rush, asked me what could have been done to prevent my daughter's tragic end, and what additional resources were needed to help physicians and families recognize, understand and treat this terrible syndrome--postpartum psychosis--which affects about one in 1,000 new mothers.

I discussed the symptoms with Congressman Rush. I talked to him about how Melanie began losing touch with reality, suffered from distorted thinking and delusions, battled hyperactivity and mania.

I told him about how her psychosis became like a monster that entered my daughter's brain, and it could not be controlled.

Even in the milder forms of postpartum depression, this disease manifests itself with lack of interest in a newborn child, fear of harming the child, fatigue, sadness, hopelessness, guilt, inadequacy and worthlessness.

Some research indicates that between 50 to 75 percent of all new mothers suffer with these "baby blues," yet little is known about how we, as families, can prevent the tragedy that fell on my family.

Chairman Pallone, Ranking Member Deal, this legislation is bi-partisan. It is "scientifically established", and recognized by the mental health community.

The bill will expand and intensify research in the National Institutes of Health and National Institutes of Mental Health on the causes, diagnoses and treatments of postpartum depression and postpartum psychosis.

This bill will provide much needed money to groups who are educating our communities and working directly with women who suffer from a postpartum depression and postpartum psychosis.

In closing Mr. Chairman, this legislation is long overdue. If this legislation had been in place in 2001, we might have recognized my daughter's troubles and prevented her death.

Maybe my granddaughter would have her mommy today.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I hope and pray that you will finally act on this legislation and spare countless other women and their families from the horrible consequences of this disease.

I implore you to do the right thing—answer my prayers and honor my daughter’s life. Save the lives of hundreds of thousands of other women, children, and families throughout this country by finding the political will to pass H.R. 20, the Melanie Blocker Stokes Postpartum Depression Research and Care Act .

Thank you.