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Health care debate poisoned

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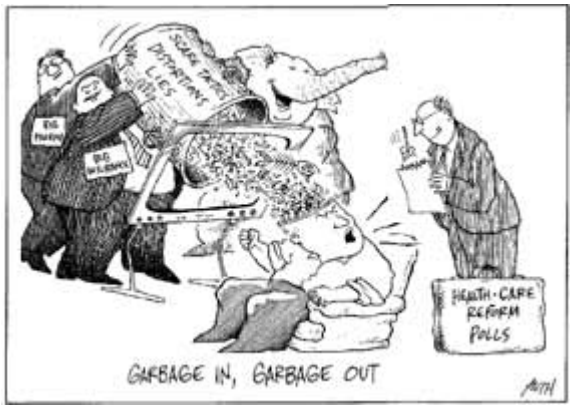

NCR Editorial

William Kostric showed up at President Obama?s health care-focused town hall meeting in Portsmouth, N.H., Aug. 11 carrying a loaded gun and a sign that read, ?It is time to water the tree of liberty.? Kostric, speaking later on MSNBC, rooted his concern for the Republic in the creation of the Federal Reserve and the 16th Amendment establishing the federal income tax.

Kostric?s political views are rather eccentric. But he?s not alone in offering bizarre critiques of the health care reform efforts before Congress; in fact, he?s joined by people who should know better but have chosen to feed hysteria with deliberate distortions and outrageous lies.

Former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin contributed her bit of mendacity by warning about the ?death panels? the health care reforms purportedly will establish, in which government bureaucrats will decide who is too expensive to keep alive. As one child?s poster in New Hampshire read, ?Obama Lies, Grandma Dies.? None of the health care proposals before Congress, of course, propose any such thing. There is a proposal for Medicare to reimburse consultations, initiated by the patient, in which they can discuss end-of-life plans with their doctors. To characterize this proposal as a ?death panel? is a simple lie.

A more complex distortion has been floated in Catholic circles. After the president clearly stated last month that he did not want the politics of abortion to enter into the health care debate, Deal Hudson, a Catholic blogger and one-time Republican Party political operative, delivered a tendentious reading of the president?s remarks that turned them on their head. ?President Obama clearly wants abortion services as part of the health care package, but he is not being honest with the American people,? Hudson wrote. Hudson has been repeating this canard in subsequent columns.

Hudson has also leveled his aim at fellow Catholics, accusing the Catholic Health Association, the St. Vincent de Paul Society and Catholic Charities of ignoring the abortion issue in their advocacy for health care reform. ?Three of the top lay Catholic organizations have divorced themselves from Catholic teaching by supporting the Obama health care plan, which would foster a culture of mandatory abortion coverage, contraceptive services, and permissive sex education, euthanasia and eugenics,? wrote Hudson. There are several falsehoods packed into that one statement.

For starters, and this is always a clue that the talking point in question comes from Republican operatives, not from magisterial teaching, there is no such thing as an ?Obama health care plan.? The most obvious difference between the reform effort this year and the 1993 debacle is that the administration did not draft an ?Obama plan? but left the legislative drafting to congressional committees. It is also untrue that there is an abortion ?mandate? in any of the proposals. Where he gets ?eugenics? remains a mystery, though it is the nature of the controversialist beast to want an exclamation point and eugenics certainly fits that bill.

The attack on Catholic organizations that have had to deal with the unjust consequences of the current health care system is as ugly as it is false. But nowhere has the attack been uglier than at the Catholic Key Blog, where the editor of the Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., diocesan newspaper, Jack Smith, launched an attack on Daughter of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, who heads the Catholic Health Association. It would have been bad enough to suggest that a sister who has dedicated her life to serving the poor and carrying on the healing ministry of Jesus was so blind-sided by her passion for health care reform that she had grown inalert to the moral urgency of keeping the reform neutral on abortion. That would be false, alas, but Smith did not even make that argument. He suggested that Keehan is a money-grubbing nun, dutifully carrying out the wishes of her corporate sponsors who stand to gain financially from the reform effort. He provided not a shred of evidence for this base charge. Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good and others have called for Smith to apologize, but there has been nothing but silence on that score from the otherwise loquacious Smith.

By contrast, the U.S. Catholic bishops, in letters from Bishop William Murphy, head of the Domestic Policy Committee, and from Cardinal Justin Rigali, head of the Pro-Life Committee, have struck precisely the right note. Catholics take a second place to no one in our advocacy of universal health insurance. Our bishops have lobbied for universal health care for decades and they proudly stand at the forefront of the current effort. The bishops also, and without histrionics, have insisted that health care reform not be a vehicle to wiggle past the Hyde Amendment, which restricts funding for abortion. The bishops have been crystal clear: We Catholics want universal health insurance but federal funding for abortion is a deal-breaker.

The difficulty is surmountable. The basic plans, private or public, should not include abortion services. These basic plans should be subsidized by the federal government for those who cannot otherwise afford them. If a person wants insurance coverage for abortion services, they would be able to purchase, with their own money, a rider to the policy. This is a straightforward way to keep health care reform neutral on the issue of abortion, a goal that has been endorsed by both the president and by the bishops.

What cannot happen is for the distorters and kooks to keep the nation from achieving a goal so long sought by the Catholic church. This year, we must not walk by the injured man on the road to Jericho. This year, the nation must put into practice the example of the Good Samaritan and provide universal health care to all God?s children.

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