



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on June 30, 2011

## Obama Administration Puts Stealth Survey of Doctors “On Indefinite Hold”

[The New American](#) reported on the proposal on Monday, pointing out the deceptive nature of the survey, in which callers pretending to be patients — and blocking their caller ID information to hide their true identities — would request appointments with various doctors’ offices. Some callers would claim to have private insurance, while others would say they were on Medicare or Medicaid. The results of these calls would be compared to see if patients with private insurance were being given priority over those with public insurance. In addition, some doctors’ offices would be called again and asked to state their appointment policies to the Department of Health and Human Services to see if their answers jibed with the results of the “mystery shopper” survey.



As word got out about the survey, doctors and Republican politicians — the latter probably prompted in part by calls from constituents — made their objections to it known. [Sen. Mark Kirk \(R-Ill.\)](#) was the most vocal, sending a lengthy letter to HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius requesting “details of how this survey would be conducted, how investigators would be punished for misconduct or extortion and how patient/physician confidentiality would be maintained.” Moreover, he wrote, spending money on the survey would not be a good use of taxpayer dollars since “there have been a number of reputable studies that confirmed many patients on Medicaid and Medicare cannot find a doctor to see them. Previous studies also confirmed we do not have enough doctors, particularly primary care doctors. Government programs often provide poor service and suffer from funding failures or corruption.”

Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) concurred that the program was both irresponsible and intrusive, saying the administration was “wasting taxpayer dollars to snoop into the care physicians are providing their patients.”

“Administration officials,” surmised the *Times*, “evidently concluded that the survey could be a political liability,” though HHS, naturally, denied that politics had anything to do with its decision.

While the administration’s reversal is welcome, it would be premature for opponents of the survey to declare victory just yet. An HHS statement [said](#), “After reviewing feedback received during the public comment period, we have determined that *now is not the time* to move forward with this research project.” (Emphasis added.) In addition, the *Times* reports that an HHS spokesman “said the survey was ‘on indefinite hold.’ ” In other words, it’s being put on ice at the present time because the public found out and made a stink about it. When the administration thinks it can carry out the program without the public’s knowledge, it will undoubtedly do so.



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Doctors can breathe a sigh of relief for the time being, but they — and the rest of us — would be wise to perform regular checkups on Uncle Sam to make sure this stealth survey isn't revived.

Photo of Kathleen Sebelius: AP Images



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