



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on October 12, 2010

ObamaCare Nonsense in Scranton

Scranton, Pennsylvania, the hometown of Vice President Joe Biden, has become the hometown of the latest ObamaCare controversy. Jeffrey Lord, writing for the American Spectator, reports that the impending closure of three Catholic hospitals in the Scranton area, almost certainly in part because of the new healthcare legislation, is threatening to become a major public-relations debacle for the Obama administration and a major drag on the electoral prospects for three Democratic congressional candidates.



On October 6, Mercy Health Partners CEO Kevin Cook [announced](#) that the three hospitals — Mercy Hospital, Scranton; Mercy Special Care Hospital, Nanticoke; and Mercy Tyler Hospital, Tunkhannock — were up for sale. The announcement, says Lord, “was big news in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The Sisters of Mercy had opened Mercy Hospital in Scranton, a major facility for the city, in 1917 — 93 years earlier. Inevitably it drew media attention.”

Among the attention it drew was from WNEP TV, which aired a story about the announcement on its evening news. Lord writes, “WNEP TV anchor Paula Giangiacomo led the story on the air by saying that ‘one big’ reason for the sale ‘is the health care reform bill signed into law this year.’ ”

Asked in an on-camera interview with reporter Jon Meyer if ObamaCare had anything to do with the sale, Cook replied, “Health care reform is absolutely playing a role. Was it the precipitating factor in this decision? No, but was it a factor in our planning over the next five years? Absolutely.”

How, specifically, might ObamaCare have played into the decision to sell the hospitals? There is a clue in the announcement itself: “For more than two decades area hospitals have endured lower-than-average reimbursements for care and a static population base.” That “static population base,” of course, is getting older by the day — Pennsylvania ranks second only to Florida in terms of the proportion of its population 65 or older — and much of their healthcare is covered by Medicare, which is being cut under ObamaCare. Lord explains:

Hospitals, said [a Scranton] doctor — frequently run a debt.... ObamaCare cuts in Medicare reimbursement have changed the rules so drastically for hospitals “you [Mercy Health Partners] are in an untenable situation,” said this physician. Most hospitals have accumulating debt because of capital investments, says the doctor. But they can’t deal with that debt if in fact their ability to earn money is cut off or drastically reduced over time.

If Cook had just stuck to his original statement that ObamaCare was not the “precipitating factor” in the decision to sell but did contribute to it, that would be the end of the story. However, on October 8 MHP issued a second [statement](#), again citing Cook as CEO, saying that discussions about the sale of the hospitals had begun “long before the passage of the Affordable Care Act” (a.k.a. ObamaCare). “The decision announced this week was due to many factors,” the statement added. Lord notes that while



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“there is no out-and-out retraction of Cook’s comments to WNEP,” the “subject of ObamaCare bearing responsibility for this sale in any fashion is disappeared.”

Moreover, he points out, “the very same day” Sr. Carol Keehan, DC, president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association, issued a [statement](#) saying, “Recent news and blog reports have assigned false motives to the proposed sale of Mercy Health Partners facilities in Northeastern Pennsylvania.” Sister Carol added:

Reports that health reform is the primary motive behind the sale are completely false, misleading and politically motivated. Deliberations to sell the facilities began well before the Affordable Care Act became law and did not hinge on enactment of the legislation.

If Sister Carol sounds a bit annoyed with accusations that ObamaCare was a factor in the hospital sale, it is likely because she was a major player in the passage of the legislation. Sister Carol was among the 21 people who received a pen that President Obama had used to sign the Affordable Care Act, a fact noted by the Catholic News Agency, which [reported](#) that, Lord writes, “Sister Carol was receiving her presidential pen from the President himself because she had been ‘supporting health care despite bishops’ objections.’ The story even pictured the pen itself alongside the presidential seal on the box in which it came, with ‘Barack Obama’ clearly visible scrawled along the side. Meaning, Sister Carol had enough clout to take on the Catholic Bishops on the President’s behalf — and win.” (The story also pointed out that Sister Carol “was joined in receiving presidential pens by some of the most strongly pro-abortion members of the Congress.”)

Sister Carol, described by Lord as “a powerhouse lobbyist,” was the sole signatory to the letter that convinced Michigan Democrat Bart Stupak to vote for ObamaCare despite the removal of the amendment he had cosponsored with Pennsylvania Republican Joseph Pitts to ban federal funding of abortions under ObamaCare. She also, [according to Slate](#), “brokered an early, instrumental deal for the nation’s hospitals, Catholic and not, to forgo billions of dollars of future Medicare and Medicaid payments.” Is it any wonder, then, that comments suggesting the sale of Catholic hospitals was partially the result of ObamaCare’s Medicare cuts would rankle her?

As “the Washington voice of the Catholic Health Association,... her clout with Catholic hospitals around America ... is considerable,” says Lord. “Not to mention her clout with the parent company [of MHP] located in Cincinnati — and not to mention with Congressman Bart Stupak.”

Thus, it comes as no surprise that when Sister Carol speaks, Catholic hospital administrators listen — including Kevin Cook, who ended up issuing a third [statement](#) by October 10 in which he echoed Sister Carol: “The rationale for our initiative [to sell the hospitals] has been mischaracterized by certain politicized media outlets and severely distorted by some special interest groups.”

Lord says that “there are doctors in Scranton ... who believe Sister Carol — or someone else connected to the Obama White House if not the [sic] someone inside the White House itself — was behind the knuckle rapping of Kevin Cook.” And if the Scranton doctor who told Lord why Medicare cuts were behind the hospital closings is correct that what’s happening in his area “is just the beginning” of a nationwide hospital closure epidemic, the negative publicity for the Obama administration — and the administration’s attempts to control it — has only just begun. “A Capitol Hill aide to a Republican U.S. Senator says of the Scranton controversy the Obama White House is terrified the Mercy Hospital sales story will ‘get legs’ as a national story — further intensifying the anti-Obama vote pollsters are recording in potentially record numbers,” writes Lord.



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Such bad PR could have an effect on Pennsylvania's House and Senate races. Two of the hospitals are in Rep. Paul Kanjorski's district, and the third is in Rep. Chris Carney's district. "Both Kanjorski and Carney have been under fire for their ObamaCare votes from GOP opponents Lou Barletta and Tom Marino respectively," according to Lord. "The startling news of the Mercy sale was barely 24 hours old when State Republican Chairman Robert P. Gleason picked up on it, issuing statements tying the ObamaCare votes of the pair to the prospective loss of Mercy." On top of that, CatholicVote.org plans to run ads critical of Kanjorski and Carney, both Catholics, on the basis of their votes for ObamaCare, likely connecting them to the sale of the hospitals — hospitals that, Lord notes, "did not perform abortions [but] could be sold to owners who would allow the procedure." The Mercy sale surely can't help Rep. Joe Sestak, another Democrat who voted for ObamaCare, in his run for the Senate, either; Sestak currently trails Republican Pat Toomey, who opposes the law.

ObamaCare has been a tale of deception, arm-twisting, and bad electoral prospects for Democrats since day one. Expect to see more of the same, including electoral defeats, as the party of Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and [Donald "The Rationer" Berwick](#) becomes ever more desperate. Exposing the underhanded tactics of the administration and its allies could help undermine the remaining public support for ObamaCare. Eliminate that, and ObamaCare is, as it should be, doomed.

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