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## Health Care Scare



By Marty Kaplan

We're about to find out whether Americans are as suspicious of the right's anti-health care reform propaganda as Iraqis are dismissive of America's lame hearts-and-minds campaign in Iraq.

"These commercials are boring, poor and annoying," Noor Sabah, an engineer in Fallujah, told the *Washington Post's* Ernesto Londono. Thanks to George W. Bush, over the past six years the U.S. has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on a TV, radio, billboard, pamphlet and faux-newspaper media barrage in Iraq. But its "morning in Iraq" message is almost universally ridiculed by Iraqis.

Back at home, a lobby called Conservatives for Patients Rights (CPR) is spending tens of millions on a multimedia ad and infomercial campaign to kill Obama's plans to fix the health care mess. The public relations firm coordinating it is the same one that spread the "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" lies about John Kerry, and the mastermind behind it, CPR chairman Richard Scott, ran the largest - and most crooked - health care company in the world.

In one of the TV ads, Scott warns of "government control over your health care choices.... Not only could a government board deny your choice in doctors, but it can control life and death for some patients." That scary board, CPR says, was smuggled into the economic stimulus bill. The ads contend that Obama intends to impose British- and Canadian-style socialized medicine, where bureaucrats ration treatment.

But the ads don't say that Obama - to the dismay of some of his supporters, including me - won't even let advocates of a single-payer healthcare system have a seat at the policy-making table.

Nor do they say that no plan under consideration would force Americans to leave their doctors or leave their insurers or join a public health insurance program.

They don't say that though the Canadian doctor who appears in the ads is critical of the Canadian system, his Web site - as the Annenberg Public Policy Center's respected factcheck.org points out - "praises the health care systems of countries like Switzerland, Austria, France, Belgium and Germany, all of which have nationalized health care."

The ads don't say that the "innocent-sounding board" in the stimulus bill that supposedly puts us on the road to healthcare serfdom is actually a research council with zero legal authority over insurance coverage, reimbursement policies, or clinical guidelines for payment, coverage or treatment. The council's only job, factcheck.org notes, is "something the government has funded since the late '70s... scientific research into which medical treatments are most effective and, in some studies, which are most cost effective." Is research into medical effectiveness and cost effectiveness dangerous? Not nearly as dangerous as the Medicare time bomb ticking in our future.

Nor, of course, do these ads tell the colorful story of Richard Scott. As The Century Foundation's health beat blogger Maggie Mahar documents in her book, *Money-Driven Medicine: The Real Reason Healthcare Costs So Much*, Richard Scott, a mergers and acquisitions lawyer from Dallas, was asked in the late '80s by Texas financier Richard Rainwater "to join him in 'doing for hospitals...what McDonald's has done in the food business and what WalMart has done in the retailing business.'" Scott rose to the challenge, ultimately becoming CEO and chairman of the for-profit megachain Columbia/HCA Healthcare Corp.

Columbia/HCA's business plan was to destroy the competition. One of Scott's tactics was to buy out the other hospitals in a community and shut all of them down but one: his. Teaching hospitals and children's hospitals, whose operating costs are highest, couldn't compete with Columbia/HCA's cost-cutting: cheap medical supplies, downsized nursing staffs, admissions triage. "Do we have an obligation to provide health care for everybody?" Scott asked. "Where do we draw the line? Is any fast-food restaurant obliged to feed everyone who shows up?" In other words, today's health care Paul Revere, warning of rationed care and lousy care, turns out to be the architect and advocate of exactly that strategy.

In 1997, the FBI busted Columbia/HCA for the most massive healthcare fraud in history: stealing billions from state and federal healthcare programs, while giving kickbacks and perks to doctors who funneled patients to its hospitals. Three Columbia/HCA executives were indicted, the company pleaded guilty to 14 felonies and it paid an unprecedented \$1.7 billion in criminal and civil fines. Shocked, shocked to find that fraud was going on in here, the company's board ousted Scott, though not without a \$10 million severance package and 10 million shares of stock then worth more than \$300 million.

Today, among the propaganda tools in Conservatives for Patients Rights' arsenal is a 30-minute infomercial that ran after *Meet the Press* a few weeks ago on the NBC affiliate in Washington, D.C. It's hosted by Gene Randall, whose face is likely to be familiar, and reassuring, to audiences; he's a former CNN correspondent. As ConsumerWatchdog.org explains, "Scott must have seen what Randall did in his expensively produced 30-minute video for Chevron, meant to counter a real *60 Minutes* report on the lawsuit against Chevron in Ecuador, where predecessor company Texaco left behind a toxic stew in the rainforest." If you don't pay close enough attention, you might think the CPR hit job on health care reform is the news.

"The millions spent on this is wasted money," Ziyad al-Aajeely, director of Iraq's nonprofit Journalistic Freedom Observatory, said as he flipped through a recent edition of *Bagdad Now*, a psychological warfare Arab-language newspaper supported by your tax dollars. "Nobody reads this." Other words Iraqis are using to describe the American multimedia campaign: "childish," "ineffective," "crude." They liken it to Saddam Hussein's propaganda, which they also mocked.

I wonder whether Americans will be equally as skeptical about Richard Scott.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.*