



Can Some Religious Groups Opt Out of Federalized Health Care?

By TOM GANTERT | April 22, 2010

Deborah VanDyk of the Hudsonville Tea Party mentioned during her April 15 tea party speech in Hudsonville that some religious organizations such as the Amish and Muslims may not have to participate in the individual mandate for health care.

It's been one of the less reported controversies involving the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act that was passed recently by the U.S. House and Senate.

An outrageous claim? Snopes.com, the website that researches urban legends, lists the claim that certain religions can opt out of the individual mandate as "undetermined."

The debate centers on the "religious conscience exception" that never specifies any particular religion but states there is an exemption for someone who certifies they are a member of a recognized religious sect.

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a health care reform expert, said the clause was put in for the Amish, who generally don't participate in government programs such as Social Security, Medicaid or Medicare.

Tanner said it is much like the consciousness objections to war in that the burden of proof is on the person making the claim.

"You can't just walk in and say, 'Oh, by the way, I don't believe in war,'" Tanner said.

Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, disputed the idea Muslims would be able to opt out of the individual mandate.

"I've never heard anyone (Muslim) ever not participate in health care," Hooper said. "I've never heard of a Muslim saying they object to Medicare or Medicaid in all the years I've been doing this."

The Snopes.com article states that it's "a tougher call" to say if Muslims would qualify for the exemption. The article states that Islam does "have a tradition of barring conventional insurance products because they invoke an element of uncertainty, gambling and the charging of interest, which are prohibited by the Koran."

But Hooper said Snopes.com is mistaking health insurance for life insurance. Hooper said, in general, Muslims may object to life insurance that accumulates interest.

"But it has nothing to do with health insurance," Hooper said.

Matt Lehrich, a White House spokesman for President Barack Obama, didn't respond to an e-mail requesting comment.

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