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Who ended 'Medicare as we know it'?

By BETSY MCCAUGHEY

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In today's special election for the 26th district US House seat in western New York, Democrats are trying out a tactic they're sure to use nationwide in 2012 -- the obscenely false claim that they will save "Medicare as we know it" from Republican efforts to reform it.

The truth is, the Obama health law, passed by Democrats last year, *already* eviscerated Medicare -- though seniors won't feel the effects for some time. And the reform plan Democrats are attacking -- Rep. Paul Ryan's entitlement-reform vision -- would undo much of the damage, while charting a new course to ensure Medicare doesn't run out of money.

"Medicare as we know it" can't survive ObamaCare's cuts of \$575 billion from the program's funding over the next decade. Just as outrageous is that the Obama law stole \$410 billion of those "savings" to expand eligibility for Medicaid.

It's like robbing Peter to pay Paul -- but it's robbing Grandma to create a whole new class of government dependants.

The nation needs to spend less on government, and entitlement reform is key. Instead, the ObamaCare law starts *new* entitlements -- with its vast expansion of Medicaid and a new insurance program for the middle class -- then imposes sacrifices on seniors to (partly) pay for these new obligations.

The administration's own actuaries say Medicare will spend \$14,731 per senior in 2019, instead of \$16,162 if the health law hadn't passed. That's less care for seniors. Richard Foster, the chief actuary for Medicare, testified to Congress that the Obama law makes such severe cuts that some hospitals may stop taking Medicare.

Such cuts might be justifiable if the "savings" extended Medicare's financial life, as President Obama and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius often claim. In fact, the Obama law just pays less to those who treat Medicare patients, then uses the cash for something else entirely. Raiding Medicare leaves *less* money to care for future retirees.

So what *can* that next generation, retiring a decade from now, count on? The Obama law puts those decision in the hands of an unelected board called the Independent Payment Advisory Board, or IPAB -- a cost-cutting panel.

The board is a radical departure from Medicare as we've known it. On the pretext that budgeting decisions should be shielded from outraged seniors and political pressures, the Democratic Congress handed nearly all control of Medicare spending to IPAB. In April, the president reiterated that the board would decide what care is "unnecessary" for seniors, and added that he wants its unprecedented powers *increased*.

Last week, Obama indicated that he'd like to reduce the deficit by taking *another* \$200 billion from Medicare over the next decade. That would be IPAB's job, too.

Yet IPAB is drawing fire from many who pushed hard for the ObamaCare law -- including the AARP and Rep. Pete Stark (D-Calif.).

Ryan's reform, passed by House Republicans early this year, would repeal the ObamaCare law in full, thereby restoring the \$575 stolen from Medicare and ending IPAB. But, to keep the program sustainable in the decades ahead, the Ryan plan would (starting in 2022) give each new Medicare enrollee a choice of private health plans and pay a premium to the policy chosen. He argues that seniors would be safer choosing their own health plan rather than putting their care in the hands of the cost-cutting IPAB panel.

Let's hope voters examine the plain facts -- because one thing is clear: Obama and the Democratic Party are *not* saving Medicare "as we know it."

Betsy McCaughey is the author of "The Obama Health Law: What It Says and How To Overturn It."