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Adventures in feminism

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

Help me out here. I always thought the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution drew a "church and state" line. So why did Michigan's Muskegon County Public Health Department join the American Civil Liberties Union to argue for Catholic hospital abortions?

On July 16, coincidentally the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Muskegon County's Public Health Department sponsored what it called an "educational event" titled, "Understanding Your Rights at Religiously Sponsored Hospitals." They held it at Muskegon Community College.

The county's Faith Groesbeck and ACLU's Genevieve Scott promised "an overview of a hospital's legal obligations to women experiencing a miscarriage or other pregnancy complications" because "even with a healthy and wanted pregnancy, there are a number of conditions that can arise during or can be exacerbated by pregnancy, including miscarriage, that require an abortion to save the woman's life or health," according to the *White Lake Beacon*.

The back story: Several years ago, Muskegon County's two hospitals joined, forming Mercy Health Partners. So no abortions in Muskegon County since the merger. The closest abortion clinic is 45 minutes away by car in Grand Rapids.

Soon after the merger, the reproductive rights brigade rode into town. Groesbeck and Scott took the lead. Curiously, Groesbeck, with a women's studies degree from Queens College in New York, worked in the county's Infant Mortality Reduction Program. But, as she wrote on Muskegon-Ottawa NOW's *Adventures in Feminism* blog, Groesbeck "learned the sad truth: nobody is going to hand us our rights on a silver platter."

Scott, Groesbeck's partner in discussing abortion as health care, is a Smith College graduate with a law

degree from the University of Pennsylvania. Scott joined the ACLU from Yale University's Program for the Study of Reproductive Justice and before that, worked for the Center for Reproductive Rights.

So that's what happened and that's who started it, with ample support from the Muskegon County Public Health Department. It is entirely possible the "information" meeting was designed to smoke out folks with past or even future stories to build a case against the Catholic hospital system.

Lo and behold, the ACLU found a case right there in Muskegon County. Ever inventive, they've sued not the hospital, but the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, claiming its directives are to blame for what they say occurred. They say the woman should have been "treated" by abortion. Instead, she had a miscarriage.

Descriptions of the Michigan case attempt to mirror the facts in Galway, Ireland, where a woman with the beginnings of a miscarriage eventually died from septicemia. In the cloudy Irish situation, it seems the Galway woman did not get antibiotics soon enough, even as she asked for an abortion. Irish lawmakers went over the top after that one, now allowing abortion if need is certified by one doctor in an emergency, two doctors in a non-emergency, and three doctors where the pregnant woman threatens suicide.

So, the question: When did abortion become a medical or psychiatric treatment? USCCB directives require proper medical attention in all cases. If that medical attention includes an indirect abortion (cancer of the womb is the usual example), that is allowed. Some conditions, such as pulmonary hypertension -- as in the famous Phoenix case a few years back -- are not necessarily treated by abortion. In fact, in 2010, a British journal article reported successful treatment in 10 of 10 pulmonary hypertension pregnancies, and healthy babies were delivered.

Why suggest abortion as a first response? Perhaps the danger of a lawsuit over a damaged child born alive has more than something to do with it.

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Michigan law is quite clear: No one can be forced to perform an abortion or refer anyone to it. Things are taken care of in Muskegon by Planned Parenthood, which has offices right there in the County Public Health Department building. Your taxpayer dollars at work.

Creepy is as creepy does. A small force of pro-abortion activists has joined Planned Parenthood, a county health department and the ACLU to take on anybody's objections -- especially Catholic objections -- to abortion. I doubt they will give up.

Genevieve Scott now works for a judge. Faith Groesbeck, whose portfolio is now substance abuse, hung up when asked about reproductive rights. The public health department's public relations spokesperson said she could not speak about it. The department head never called back.

Small-town America or not, in Muskegon, they are playing for keeps. Fact: In Native American Chippewa language, "Muskegon" means "swamp."

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic studies. Her newest book is *Mysticism and the Spiritual Quest: A Crosscultural Anthology*, and her recent books include *Women & Catholicism* (Palgrave-Macmillan), *Women in Ministry: Emerging Questions about the Diaconate* (Paulist Press) and *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future*

(with Gary Macy and William T. Ditewig, Paulist Press). She will speak March 13 at Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Mo.]

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