

Rand Paul's Upstart Ophthalmology Group Leaves Little Mark

Zachary Roth | May 27, 2010, 11:26AM

Rand Paul's reputation for marching to his own drummer may extend to his medical career. The GOP Senate candidate is the founder and president of a certifying board for eye doctors, which he appears to have set up as a rival to the existing certification board. But his organization has left little public record, and the legitimacy with which it's viewed remains unclear at best.

In 1999, Paul created a new non-profit organization, the National Board of Ophthalmology (NBO), headquartered at his home in Bowling Green, Kentucky, in order to "provide information to the public concerning physicians with exemplary qualifications in the medical specialty of ophthalmology," according to the organization's founding document, filed online with the Kentucky Secretary of State's office. Page One, a Kentucky politics blog, first noted the group's existence last month.

"It was a certifying board," Beth Ann Slembariski, the administrator of the major existing ophthalmology certifying board, the American Board of Ophthalmology (ABO), told TPMuckraker.

Annual filings for NBO list Paul -- a Tea Party favorite, who days after an upset win in the GOP primary for Kentucky's U.S. Senate race ignited a firestorm last week by criticizing a key provision of the Civil Rights Act -- as the group's "owner and president." Paul's wife, Kelley Paul, is listed as its vice president, and his father-in-law, Hilton Ashby, is listed as its secretary. But it's not clear how involved Kelley Paul or Ashby have been. Reached at his home in Russellville, Kentucky, Ashby told TPMuckraker: "I can't tell you what the organization does." Informed that he was listed as the group's secretary, Ashby said: "I was at one time involved as a secretary on something. But I don't know whether it was about that specifically or not."

Paul's organization has had little public presence since its founding over a decade ago. It appears to have no website, and a Lexis-Nexis search turns up no articles mentioning the group. Nor does it appear to have filed tax forms with the IRS, according to a search of a database listing non-profits. Indeed, the state of Kentucky dissolved NBO in 2000 after it failed to file the appropriate forms, according to the online records, but it was reinstated in 2005, and has filed an annual report every year since then.

Why start a new certifying board? Slembariski explained that in 1992, the American Board of Ophthalmology -- the established certification board -- had instituted new rules requiring that eye doctors re-certify every ten years. But it was legally barred from requiring recertification from doctors who had been certified before '92. In the ensuing years, that caused anger among younger ophthalmologists, who now were subject to a time-consuming process that their older competitors would be spared.

A 2004 [article](#) in an online ophthalmology journal expresses some of these frustrations with ABO, and notes: "[T]here are other organizations out there that are willing and able to have you take a test to be board-certified, such as the online test that is offered by the NBO. The NBO's test is cheaper and far more appealing to the younger ophthalmologists with a time-limited certification."

But it's unclear how rigorous the certification process used by Paul's group is -- and how much legitimacy the group is seen as having in ophthalmologist circles. Unlike the established ABO, Paul's organization is not a member of the American Board of Medical Specialties, an umbrella group for medical specialty organizations. Slembariski declined to offer a direct assessment on how Paul's group is viewed in ophthalmology circles, but she said that creating a legitimate certification board is "a very big endeavor." She added: "I don't think [NBO] was very successful," though she acknowledged she wasn't personally familiar with the details of its record.

Officials for two other eye-doctor groups -- the American Academy of Ophthalmology and the American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery -- told TPMuckraker they'd never heard of Paul's group. "I think it's fair to say that we would have heard of most organizations involved in ophthalmology in the US," said John Ciccone of ASCRS.

An internet search turned up eight ophthalmologists, from California to Virginia, who claim that they're certified though NBO. All also claim certification through ABO, the established certification group.

Neither the Paul campaign nor any of those eye doctors responded immediately to TPMuckraker's requests for comment on NBO. Paul -- whose father, Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX), is a Texas obstetrician -- also did not respond immediately to a message left at his Bowling Green medical practice.

About 96 percent of American ophthalmologists are certified through ABO, the established group, Slembariski said. But Paul himself is not. He was certified from 1995 until 2005, when his certification lapsed, and was not renewed.