

Doctors polled on assisting the terminally ill to end their lives

DOCTORS will be asked if they would help a terminally ill patient to die and whether the law should be changed to allow assisted dying.

The Royal College of Physicians (RCP) is to poll its 35,000 members and fellows next month on whether there should be a change in the law to permit assisted dying. It will also ask whether its members would be prepared to "participate actively" in assisted dying if the law was changed.

Professor Andrew Goddard, president of the RCP, said the survey, which will be emailed out next month, was essential to the college's understanding of its members' views.

He said: "The Royal College of Physicians is frequently asked for its stance on this high-profile issue, which may be cited in legal cases and parliamentary debate, so it is essential that we base this on an up-to-date understanding of our members' and fellows' views."

The RCP said it would adopt a neutral position until two thirds of respondents say that it should be in favour or opposed to a change in the law. This means it will neither support nor oppose a change in the law so it can reflect the differing views of its members and fellows in discussions with government and others.

Assisted dying is illegal in Britain, with doctors facing a jail term of up to 14 years under the Suicide Act 1961. There is no prohibition on assisting a suicide in Scottish law, but anyone doing so could be charged with murder or culpable homicide, the RCP said.

The college defines assisted dying as "the supply by a doctor of a lethal dose of drugs to a patient who is terminally ill, meets certain criteria that will be defined by law, and requests those drugs in order that they might be used by the person concerned to end their life".