

Bitter split on assisted dying hits Royal College of Physicians

Times 1.2.2019

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Chris Smyth Health Editor

Doctors are in open revolt against their professional body amid claims that the Royal College of Physicians has been captured by lobbyists for assisted dying.

A former official has threatened legal action over a new vote on the issue that he called a "sham poll".

The college opposes allowing doc-

tors to help terminally ill patients to end their lives but plans to poll its members and fellows again. Unless there is a 60 per cent majority for or against assisted dying, it will adopt a neutral position.

Opponents of the new poll argue that a neutral stance would amount to "tacit support for assisted suicide".

Most medical organisations oppose changing the law. A free vote in the

Commons in 2015 rejected proposals that would have allowed people with less than six months to live to be prescribed drugs to end their lives with the approval of two doctors and a judge.

In a letter to *The Times*, two dozen doctors and academics write: "We are worried that this move represents a deliberate attempt by a minority on [the college's governing council] to drop the

college's opposition to assisted suicide even if the majority of the membership vote to maintain it."

The college said it was reasonable to require a supermajority on a contentious issue but the objectors, who include Nigel Biggar, regius professor of moral and pastoral theology at Oxford, urged a return to "more orthodox, justifiable and democratic approach". They

are gathering signatures for an online letter protesting against the plan.

John Saunders, a former chairman of the college's ethics committee, has threatened a judicial review of the poll, saying it is "manifestly unreasonable" that if it delivers the same result as a 2014 vote it will change the position.

In 2014, 58 per cent of doctors said

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they opposed a change in the law and 44 per cent said the college should be formally opposed. Thirty-one per cent said it should be neutral and 25 per cent wanted it to support assisted dying.

Professor Saunders called the new vote a "sham poll" to allow neutrality, saying: "The college has come under a disproportionate influence by advocates of physician-assisted suicide."

Andrew Goddard, president of the college, said: "The Royal College of Physicians is frequently asked for its stance on this... so it is essential that we base this on an up-to-date understanding of our members' and fellows' views. Because doctors are divided, the RCP wants to ensure that we only hold a position one way or another if there is a clear majority... The RCP has not campaigned on this issue and has no plans to do so."

Helping someone to commit suicide is punishable by up to 14 years in prison. The Crown Prosecution Service issued guidelines five years ago suggesting that it would not always prosecute when a person had expressed a settled will to die and friends or family had helped, but stressed that it would continue to prosecute doctors.

The failed bill, proposed by Lord Falconer of Thoroton, required a patient to end their life with prescribed drugs. It did not cover doctors killing patients.

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