

Doctors' group drops opposition to assisted suicide after divisive poll

Chris Smyth Health Editor

One of the country's most influential medical bodies has ended its opposition to assisted dying after a controversial poll that opponents branded "absurd".

The Royal College of Physicians (RCP) said that medical opinion had moved in favour of allowing doctors to help dying patients end their own lives, making neutrality the most representative position.

A legal challenge from opponents, who said a requirement for a supermajority of 60 per cent to retain the college's previous stance on an attempt to rig the poll, was thrown out yesterday by the High Court.

The result means that England's oldest and grandest medical professional standards body will no longer lobby MPs to retain existing laws that make assisting suicide punishable by up to 14 years in prison, but will aim to set out both sides of the argument.

The Royal College of Radiologists, which represents many cancer doctors, also decided not to take a position yesterday after polling its members, but most leading medical bodies remain opposed to assisted dying.

"As public opinion has changed, it is clear from our survey that physician opinion has changed with time," Andrew Goddard, president of the RCP, told *The Times*. "The trouble with a polarised set of opinions is that to take either side over the other would not be representative."

The survey of 6,885 doctors in 39 medical specialties found 49 per cent opposing a change in the law, down from 58 per cent when the poll was last carried out in 2014, with 41 per cent

Analysis

One by one the hard cases have come, and they have not changed the law (Chris Smyth writes).

There was Tony Nicklinson, 58, paralysed by a stroke, who described locked-in syndrome as a living nightmare. He lost a High Court battle in 2012 to allow doctors to end his life, and died days later after refusing food.

Jeffrey Spector, 54, feared a tumour in his spine would paralyse him and flew to Switzerland to end his life in 2015 while he was still able.

Last November Noel Conway, 68, who says he is "entombed" by motor neurone disease, was turned down by the Supreme Court in his attempt to allow medical

assistance to end his life. The judges said they had reached their conclusion with "some reluctance" and another, Lord Sumption, has criticised politicians for surrendering such decisions to the judiciary.

When parliament was last asked, however, in 2015, a bill introduced by Lord Falconer of Thoroton that would have allowed doctors to help patients with no more than six months to live to end their lives with the agreement of a judge was defeated by 330 to 118 in 2015. While the position of the RCP position has no direct effect on law, it has given expert opinion to MPs and peers — and it is no longer quite so easy to

say that doctors oppose assisted dying. Most voters back a change in the law, and the question is how far establishment opinion will shift.

Doctors have conventionally opposed assisted suicide, never mind the direct killing of patients who want to die, but there has long been a substantial minority who disagree. As this poll suggests, that minority is growing. Depending on your point of view, that either makes it reasonable for the RCP to reflect the more even split of opinion, or shows an attempt by an emboldened faction to remove one of the most authoritative voices in opposition to assisted dying.

supporting a change, up from 32 per cent.

In addition 43 per cent said the RCP should be opposed to assisted dying, almost unchanged since 2014, while 32 per cent said it should be in favour, up from 25 per cent. Neutrality was

supported by only 25 per cent, down from 31 per cent.

"You can see the direction of travel — at some point given that direction we were going to move from opposed to neutral," Professor Goddard said. "We are trailing public opinion on this

issue." Polls have found a majority of voters back a change.

Critics said it made no sense that the least popular position had triumphed. Professor Goddard defended the decision to change the rules of the poll, saying the college "had Brexit in mind and the dangers of a very close result" in setting the 60 per cent threshold for an active position. "We have been open from the start of this process that adopting a neutral position will mean that we can reflect the differing opinions among our membership," he said.

Palliative care doctors, who specialise in relieving the pain of dying patients, were the strongest opponents of a change, with 80 per cent saying the RCP should be opposed.

Baroness Finlay of Llandaff, a leading palliative care specialist, said: "Nearly twice as many RCP members and fellows voted for the college to oppose assisted suicide than voted for neutrality. Yet as a result of the recent arbitrary and politically motivated change in the rules their views have been ignored." Gordon Macdonald, of the anti-euthanasia group Care Not Killing, pointed to the poll's finding that only a quarter of doctors would be willing to help a patient to die. "Most doctors are clear that they do not want a change in the law on assisted suicide or euthanasia," he said.

However, Sarah Wootton, of Dignity in Dying, praised the RCP for a "balanced and compassionate stance" and urged other medical bodies to follow its lead. "This move from the RCP will allow the voices of terminally ill people and their loved ones to rightly be front and centre in this debate," she said.

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