

Fury after Royal College drops its opposition to assisted dying

By Laura Donnelly HEALTH EDITOR

THE Royal College of Physicians has dropped its opposition to assisted dying, following a controversial poll.

The college – the largest for hospital doctors – will adopt a “neutral” stance after polling its 36,000 members about whether the law should be changed to permit doctor-assisted dying.

The decision prompted fury last night, amid accusations that the organisation had carried out a “sham poll” in order to shift its position.

The survey found 43 per cent of respondents were opposed to a change in the law, while 32 per cent wanted to see it changed, and 25 per cent backed a neutral stance.

But under the terms of the poll, the college has now adopted a neutral position, because neither side achieved 60 per cent of the votes.

One in four medics said they would be prepared to participate in assisted dying if the law changed. Dr Gordon

Macdonald, chief executive of Care Not Killing, said the position was “absurd”. “Yet again doctors have shown they do not support changing the law on assisted suicide,” he said.

Baroness Finlay of Llandaff and Lord Carlile of Berriew, co-chairmen of Living and Dying Well, said: “Campaigners for assisted suicide may try to claim

‘We won’t be focusing on assisted dying. Instead, we will continue championing high-quality palliative care’

that the consultation shows a shift in medical opinion on this highly charged matter. In reality it cannot be regarded as a serious expression of medical opinion and it has damaged the college’s reputation as a professional body.”

Prof Andrew Goddard, the college president, said: “It is clear that there is a range of views on assisted dying in

medicine, just as there is in society. We have been open from the start that adopting a neutral position will mean that we can reflect the differing opinions among our membership.

“Neutral means the RCP neither supports nor opposes a change in the law and we won’t be focusing on assisted dying in our work. Instead, we will continue championing high-quality palliative care services.”

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.

Sarah Wootton, chief executive of pressure group Dignity in Dying, said: “It is highly significant that the college has dropped its long-standing opposition to assisted dying in favour of a neutral position. This will allow the RCP to reflect the range of views among its members and to contribute to the debate in a more balanced way.”

D. Tel. 22.3.2014