

Doctors' ethics chief quits over

change to assisted suicide policy

By Tim Wyatt

THE chairman of the Royal College of Physicians' (RCP) ethics committee has resigned after the college dropped its opposition to legalising assisted suicide.

The RCP announced last month that, after a survey of doctors' opinions, it was abandoning its formal opposition to assisted suicide and would instead be neutral on the issue.

But now Albert Weale, an academic

who was chairman of the RCP's ethics committee, has quit, saying that the decision was "not coherent" and "unfair". Two other members of his committee have also walked out.

The resignations will intensify pressure on the college - Britain's oldest and most prestigious medical association - to review its new stance.

A group of doctors has also begun legal proceedings in an effort to force the RCP to back down. The group has

raised £24,000 through online crowdfunding to pay for their legal action.

Prof Weale, emeritus professor of political theory and public policy at University College London, said he saw no reason why the RCP's governing council had decided to abandon its previous position, which stated the organisation could not support changing the law on assisted suicide.

"There seems to be no chain of coherent reasoning leading to the

council's own position - a situation I regret deeply," he said.

He also criticised the handling of the survey of doctors. The poll asked doctors if the RCP should be for, against or neutral on assisted suicide - 43 per cent voted for opposition, 32 per cent backed changing the law, and just 25 per cent voted for neutrality.

But unlike previous polls on the same question, the RCP's council had decided in advance they should auto-

matically switch to neutrality unless any of the three options was backed by a super majority of 60 per cent.

As a result, the RCP announced last month it would be neutral on the issue, despite only one in four doctors endorsing that position.

In his resignation letter, seen by *The Sunday Telegraph*, Prof Weale told Andrew Goddard, the president of the RCP, that the way the survey had been set up presented "considerable prob-

lems of procedural unfairness". He said: "There is simply no point in the committee offering reasoned positions if they are ignored by council."

Prof Goddard said he was saddened Prof Weale had resigned his post. He said the committee's advice to remain opposed to changing the law was "highly valued", but they had decided against following it. Instead they thought "that neutral was the most appropriate position for the RCP to adopt".

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