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NEWS

ASSISTED SUICIDE AND THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS: THE PROFESSION HAS NOT MOVED ON THIS ISSUE, SO NEITHER SHOULD THE COLLEGE

Despite the court case (page 4) the Royal College of Physicians did indeed use the results of its survey to support its new position of neutrality on assisted suicide. Those who brought the court case against the College made a press statement on the 23rd March.

At the time of going to press the case is currently ongoing

Statement for released on 23rd March 2019 by
Paul Conrathe on behalf of
Dr Kathy Myers FRCP, Retired Consultant in Palliative Medicine, London
Dr Adrian Treloar FRCP, Consultant Old Age Psychiatrist, London
Dr David Randall MRCP, Registrar in Renal Medicine, London
Dr Dermot Kearney FRCP, Consultant Cardiologist, Gateshead

We are disappointed but not surprised by the decision of the Royal College of Physicians to move to a position of neutrality on assisted suicide.

The Council of the RCP made clear its desire to see the College adopt a position of neutrality on this issue. It is very difficult to achieve a majority for any particular position in a vote with multiple options, and the conventional approach in such cases is to accept the view of the largest group.

The College decided to require a 60% supra-majority to maintain opposition to assisted suicide, in a three way question, making today's outcome almost inevitable.

The results of this survey justify our decision to challenge the Royal College of Physicians in court over its handling of this poll.

We note that:

- 43.4% in this survey believe the College should continue to oppose the legalisation of assisted suicide, compared with 44.4% in 2014 - in both cases representing the largest group of doctors.

- Once people answering 'don't know' are removed (this option was not present in 2014), 55% of those who expressed a personal opinion on assisted suicide are opposed to its legalisation, compared to 57.5% in 2014.

- Only 25% of RCP members and fellows support the College's new position of neutrality (down from 31% in 2014), and neutrality is the least well supported of the three potential positions the College could hold.

The results therefore show that the views of RCP members and fellows are virtually unchanged since 2014 – making the College's new position at odds with the opinions expressed by the largest group of grassroots Members and Fellows.

The College has dropped its historic opposition to assisted suicide despite the largest group of respondents being personally opposed to this and supporting public opposition to assisted suicide. The new position of neutrality is supported by a mere quarter of the College.

We were disappointed not to receive permission today to challenge the decision of the College in the High Court on technical grounds.

Sick and vulnerable people are at risk as a result of College neutrality on assisted suicide. The profession has not moved on this issue, so neither should the College.