

Secular Medical Forum warns that new Conscientious Objection Bill threatens provision of patient care

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Secular doctors have voiced serious concerns about the Conscientious Objection (Medical Activities) Bill, which had its first reading in the House of Lords on 4th June 2015.

The legislation would greatly expand the existing provision which allows for staff to opt-out of involvement in procedures such as the termination of a pregnancy. Under the new law, the opt-out would include "any supervision, delegation, planning or supporting of staff" involved in abortions or "the withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment."

Dr Antony Lempert, a practising GP and chair of the Secular Medical Forum, commented: "Conscientious objection to the active participation in the ending of someone's life or performing an abortion is fairly uncontroversial. However, patients must not be left in a position whereby the doctor is abandoning them because they have chosen a particular reasonable, legal treatment option.

"Patients making informed treatment choices should be supported by healthcare professionals whether or not their beliefs and values are shared.

"The risk is that granting doctors and nurses wider freedoms to withdraw from providing care risks compromising the provision of care; this is something we have seen in other countries such as Italy where some patients have been unable to access abortion services."

Dr Lempert expressed his concerns that the bill appears to undermine a Supreme Court judgment from December 2014 in which two midwives seeking an exemption from any abortion-related activity were advised that, whilst they did not need to participate in any aspect of the abortion itself, their professional responsibilities did extend to wider roles such as the supervision of nursing colleagues.

The legislation could potentially encompass medical staff even tangentially "participating in" abortion or the withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment.

The Secular Medical Forum have warned that the proposed bill could even result in doctors and nurses withdrawing from providing treatment to "vulnerable patients who have different beliefs and values."

"Doctors and nurses choose our professions; patients don't choose to need our professional expertise," he said. "Healthcare professionals should take responsibility for choosing a suitable role that will not bring their own beliefs into conflict with the care they are expected to provide to patients. Where there is conflict, doctors may need to set aside their own personal beliefs in order to provide care as specified in GMC guidance for doctors."

The legislation was proposed by Baroness Nuala O'Loan, and came 22nd in the ballot of Private Members' Bills. In 2014, Baroness O'Loan quit the British Medical Association's medical ethics committee because of the organisation's support for extending abortion rights to Northern Ireland. She said at the time: "I believe in the sanctity and sacredness of human life, so I could not commit to anything inconsistent with that position".

NSS campaigns manager Stephen Evans commented: "There is a balance between recognising the legitimate conscientious objection of medical practitioners directly involved in procedures, and providing safe and comprehensive access to healthcare.

"We fear that this Bill, if it gets through the significant parliamentary hurdles in its way, would upset that balance drastically, and allow for an inappropriately wide exemption- covering people who are at the very periphery of these services. This would clearly have a damaging effect on patients' access to healthcare."

The Second reading of the Bill is yet to be scheduled.

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