



Irish College of General Practitioners

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Assisted Dying

OPENING STATEMENT

Safeguarding Medical Professionals

November 2023

Introduction

The **Irish College General Practitioners (ICGP)** welcomes this opportunity to assist the Joint Committee on Assisted Dying (JCAD) in considering the key issues around safeguarding medical professionals.

The ICGP delegation comprises:

- Dr Diarmuid Quinlan, Medical Director, ICGP
- Dr Deirdre Collins, Chairperson, ICGP
- Mr Fintan Foy, Chief Executive Officer, ICGP

The ICGP is the professional body for general practice in Ireland and the representative organisation on education, training, and standards. ICGP has over 4,500 members and associate members and over 1,000 doctors in GP training.

The ICGP has initiated engagement and education to identify and support the perspectives of all our GP members. Safeguarding all medical professionals and all patients is an important strategic objective.

Medical professionals and patients will require clear and unambiguous eligibility criteria, embedded conscientious objection, comprehensive oversight and robust professional governance should assisted dying legislation be enacted.

Member engagement around assisted dying: The ICGP has commenced a process of engagement with our members around the professional, ethical and legal issues arising with assisted dying.

- The ICGP had a keynote address on “*Ethical Issues for GPs*’ at our Autumn 2023 conference attended by over 300 GPs.
- ICGP published ethical articles in our FORUM member journal.
- Assisted dying was the subject of a dedicated ICGP Council workshop in February 2023. This was attended by thirty-seven council members.

The workshop considered two key issues:

- (1) How ICGP can support all members if assisted dying legislation is introduced.
- (2) Conscientious objection.

Council members at this workshop expressed a wide diversity of views and recommended that ICGP seek our GP member views around assisted dying. The ICGP engaged RedC Research & Marketing to undertake a qualitative exploration of the views and perspectives of our GP members on assisted dying. All ICGP members were invited to participate, with six focus groups across July-August 2023.

The ICGP-RedC report "*Voluntary Assisted Dying: A report based on ICGP Membership consultation*" was published in September 2023, fully shared with all ICGP members, and accompanies this submission.

This report found that most GPs recognise assisted dying is a societal issue, warranting public and professional discussion. GPs value informed professional discussion and clinical education "*to help our patients*". While some GPs "*are vehemently opposed, and others strongly in support of assisted dying, the majority are conflicted, in the provision or support of such a service*". The report identified that most "*would not like to get personally involved*" there is "*more passive acceptance than support or rejection, and most (GPs) want the opportunity to discuss this with their peers and ultimately with their patients*".

The report clearly identifies the key strategic role of the ICGP to '*inform and educate doctors*', supporting all GPs to have appropriate discussions with their patients.

These engagements enable ICGP to better understand and represent GP views and perspectives to the Oireachtas. These consultations confirm the role of ICGP is to support all our members.

There are many safeguarding issues for all clinicians and patients, around assisted dying. The key safeguards, should legislation be introduced, identified by ICGP members include:

1. **Safeguarding vulnerable people:** Concerns exist around patient abuse or coercion, especially of "*elderly in nursing homes and those (with) dementia*". The inclusion and exclusion eligibility criteria must be clear and unambiguous, to safeguard all patients and all clinicians.

2. **Recognising and protecting conscientious objection:** GPs clearly and unambiguously articulated “*there would be no compulsion*” to participate in any aspect of assisted dying.
3. **Providing comprehensive oversight and robust governance:** Comprehensive oversight and robust governance should encompass every aspect along the assisted dying pathway, spanning eligibility criteria through to monitoring, reporting, and review.
4. **Safeguarding Palliative Care Services:** GPs were concerned that palliative care might experience resource constraints if assisted dying is legalised. This could impact clinician and patient care options.
5. **Protecting the Doctor-Patient relationship:** this important relationship could be adversely affected, with broader implications for the patient’s family and wider local community.

Summary and Conclusion

We welcome today’s opportunity to share the perspectives of our GP community with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Assisted Dying. The ICGP has commenced a programme of engagement and education to identify and support the diverse perspectives of all our GP members. Safeguarding all medical professionals and all patients is a shared strategic objective.

Thank you for inviting ICGP to this Oireachtas meeting.