

Public and professional opinion on physician-assisted dying

Within society, as well as within the medical profession, there is a range of views on physician-assisted dying. In 2015, as part of our end-of-life care and physician-assisted dying (ELCPAD) project, we reviewed the academic literature on doctors' views on assisted dying and some of the main polls, surveys and research on public opinion. This information is available on our website,¹ and is not repeated here.

Here we outline some of the surveys of public and professional opinion carried out since the ELCPAD work concluded. This includes:

- updated information on the British Social Attitudes Survey data provided in the ELCPAD report to include the results of questions asked in its 2017 survey;
- the 2019 survey carried out by the Royal College of Physicians;
- the 2019 survey carried out by the Royal College of Radiologists' Faculty of Clinical Oncology; and
- the 2019 survey carried out by the Royal College of General Practitioners.

We have also included details of the World Medical Association's declaration on this topic which was agreed in October 2019.

Lastly, we have summarised the relevant findings from the ELCPAD discussion events we held in 2015 with doctors and the public.

We have not included details of any of the recent polls commissioned by other organisations, but these can easily be found through online search engines.

British Social Attitudes Survey

The British Social Attitudes Survey is generally regarded as one of the most reliable surveys of public opinion as it uses a large and diverse sample and is regularly repeated. At varying intervals, a question is included about whether the law should allow active voluntary euthanasia performed by a doctor for a patient with a 'painful incurable disease'. The most recent survey to address this question was published in 2017 and the results are set out in the table below, together with those from previous years when this question has been asked.

British Social Attitudes Surveys – Attitudes to voluntary euthanasia, 1983-2016

Should the law allow a doctor to end the life of a patient with painful incurable disease?	1983	1984	1989	1994	2005	2012	2016
Yes (%)	77	75	79	82	80	81	77
No (%)	22	24	20	15	18	16	21
Unweighted base	1650	1562	1307	984	1786	956	1619

In 2017, the BSA report looked in more detail at euthanasia, considering public opinion on a range of different scenarios. The study analysed the levels of support across five different scenarios and assessed whether people thought voluntary euthanasia (administered by a third party) should 'definitely' or 'probably' be allowed for each scenario. The results are provided in the table below. More analysis and discussion of these results can be found in the report itself.²

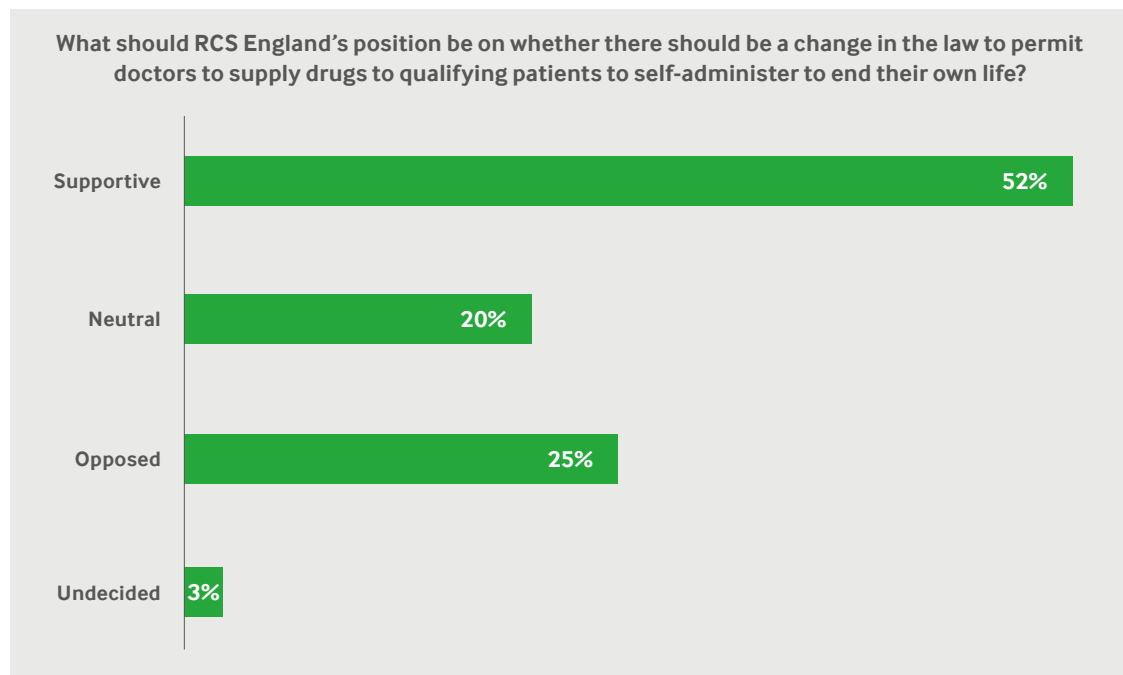


British Social Attitudes Survey 34 – Attitudes towards voluntary euthanasia

	By a doctor for someone with an incurable and painful illness from which they will die	By a close relative for someone with an incurable and painful illness from which they will die	By a doctor for someone with an incurable and painful illness from which they will <u>not</u> die	By a doctor for someone who is dependent, but not in pain or danger of death
Should the law allow voluntary euthanasia in this situation?	%	%	%	%
Definitely should	50	16	20	19
Probably should	29	23	30	31
Probably should not	8	26	22	21
Definitely should not	12	33	25	26
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1928</i>	<i>1928</i>	<i>1928</i>	<i>1928</i>

Medical bodies**Royal College of Surgeons (RCSE)**

In February 2023, the RCSE surveyed its 17,631 members on what the College's position on physician-assisted dying should be. A total of 3,268 responses were received (a response rate of 19%) and the results are set out below.

Royal College of Surgeons of England (RCSE survey results, March 2023)

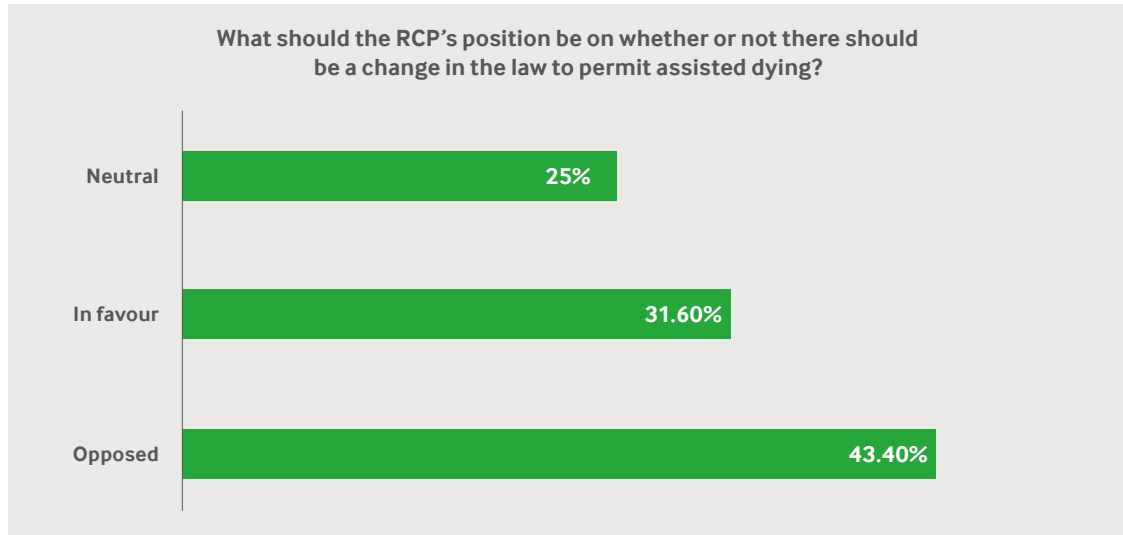
The survey asked additional questions about respondents' personal views about whether the law should change and about the role of doctors in any future assisted dying process. The full report can be found [here](#).

Following discussion about the results, the Council of the RCSE decided, in May 2023, to change its policy on assisted dying from opposition to a change in the law, to a position of neutrality.

Royal College of Physicians (RCP)

The RCP polled its 36,000 members on what the College's position on physician-assisted dying should be in early 2019. A total of 6,885 responses were received and the results are set out below.

Royal College of Physicians – Assisted dying survey results 2019



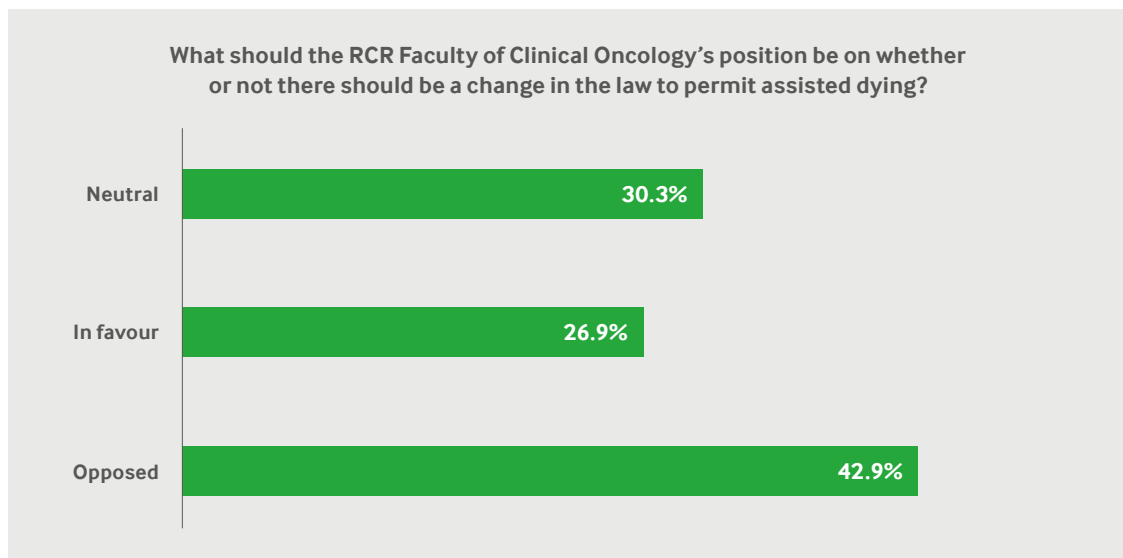
The survey asked additional questions about whether the law should be changed in the UK to permit assisted dying, and whether, regardless of personal views, doctors would be prepared to participate in assisted dying should it become legal.³

The Council of the Royal College of Physicians had decided, in advance of the poll being conducted, that it would adopt a neutral position unless 60% of respondents said the RCP should be in favour of, or opposed to, a change in the law. As this 'supermajority' was not reached, the RCP moved from opposing a change in the law, to a position of neutrality. In March 2020, the Royal College of Physicians published a clarifying statement to make clear that its position of neutrality meant that it was neither supporting nor opposing a change in the law, to try to represent the breadth of views within its membership. The full statement can be found [here](#).

Royal College of Radiologists' (RCR) Faculty of Clinical Oncology

In February 2019 the Royal College of Radiologists surveyed the 1,572 members of its Faculty of Clinical Oncology on what its position should be on a change in the law to permit assisted dying. A total of 532 valid responses were received. The results are set out below.

Royal College of Radiologists' Faculty of Clinical Oncology – Assisted dying survey results 2019

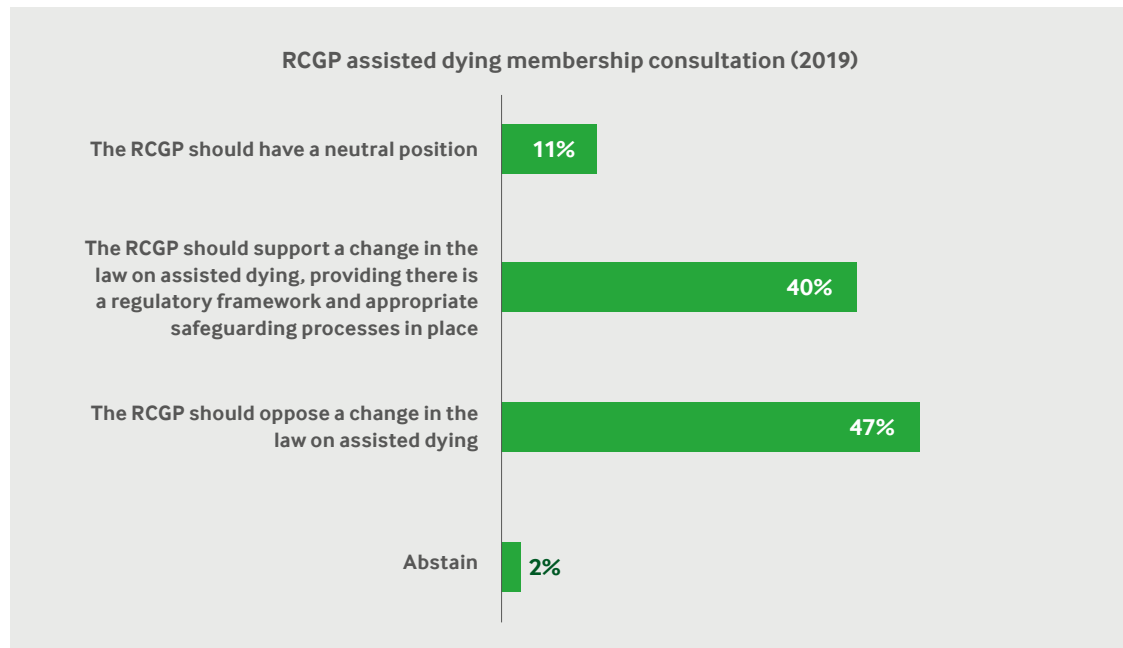


The survey asked additional questions about the respondents' personal views about a change in the law and whether, regardless of their personal views, they would be prepared to actively participate in assisted dying if the law changed to make it lawful.⁴

The Royal College of Radiologists' Faculty of Clinical Oncology does not hold an official position on assisted dying.

Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP)

The RCGP polled its members in late 2019 about what the College's position on the law on assisted dying should be. Of the 49,539 members who were invited to participate, a total of 6,674 members from across the UK responded.



Following the all-member consultation, the RCGP Council announced its decision to retain the College's opposition to a change in the law on assisted dying on 21 February 2020. In September 2020, a legal challenge was issued to the RCGP's decision to remain opposed to physician-assisted dying following its member survey. Details of the claim can be found [here](#).

World Medical Association (WMA)

In October 2019 the WMA reaffirmed its long-standing policy of opposition to all forms of physician-assisted dying.⁵ The revised declaration continues to state that no doctor should be forced to participate in assisted dying or be obliged to make referrals. The statement, in the previous declaration, that doctors who participate in assisted dying are acting 'unethically' has now been removed.

References

- 1 British Medical Association (2015) *End-of-life care and physician-assisted dying. Volume 1 – setting the scene*, pp.76-96. Available at: www.bma.org.uk/endoflifecare
- 2 National Centre for Social Research (2017) *British Social Attitudes 34 – Moral Issues* (available at: https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39147/bsa34_moral_issues_final.pdf)
- 3 The full results of the RCP's survey can be found online at: <https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/news/no-majority-view-assisted-dying-moves-rcp-position-neutral>
- 4 The full results of the RCR Faculty of Clinical Oncology's survey can be found online at: <https://www.rcr.ac.uk/posts/uk-clinical-oncology-members-and-fellows-poll-assisted-dying>
- 5 World Medical Association (2019) *WMA Declaration on Euthanasia and Physician-assisted Suicide*. Available at: <https://www.wma.net/news-post/world-medical-association-reaffirms-opposition-to-euthanasia-and-physician-assisted-suicide/>

(Updated June 2023)

BMA

British Medical Association, BMA House,
Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9JP
bma.org.uk

© British Medical Association, 2023

BMA 20230452