

## Assisted dying

House of Commons, Westminster Hall Debate

The law on assisted dying

Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> January

### About the BMA

The BMA (British Medical Association) is a professional association and trade union representing and negotiating on behalf of all doctors and medical students in the UK. It is a leading voice advocating for outstanding health care and a healthy population. It is an association providing members with excellent individual services and support throughout their lives.

### BMA position on assisted dying

**Policy position:** The BMA represents doctors and medical students from across the UK who hold a wide range of views on physician-assisted dying. Since 2006, however, our policy position has been that the UK law should not be changed to permit assisted dying in any form (including assisted dying with involvement from doctors).

**Member survey:** In February we will be surveying all our members for their views on what the BMA's position on physician-assisted dying should be. The results from this survey will not determine BMA policy – rather, the results will feed into a subsequent debate about the BMA's position by representatives attending our annual policy-making conference in June. Our policy position opposing physician-assisted dying will stand unless, and until, a decision is made otherwise.

### BMA policy position

In the UK, the law does not permit assisted dying in any form.<sup>1</sup> Since 2006, the BMA has opposed any change in the law to permit assisted dying; this was reaffirmed in 2016 when our representative body rejected a motion to adopt a neutral position, following a large-scale project engaging with over 500 BMA members and members of the public.<sup>2</sup>

Our opposition to a change in the law on assisted dying (including assisted dying with the involvement from doctors) is rooted in the following key concerns raised by our members:

- **Medical involvement in assisted dying could fundamentally alter the ethos within which medical care is provided.** The principal purpose of medicine is to improve patients' quality of life, not to foreshorten life. A number of doctors have concerns that the trust found in

<sup>1</sup> In the most recent Parliamentary debate in Westminster, in 2015, MPs voted against a private member's bill, which was proposed by a Labour MP, Robert Marris, to change the law. In a vote on the bill, 330 MPs voted against it and 118 voted in favour.

<sup>2</sup> To read more about the history of the BMA's policy position, as well as our 2016 project on end-of-life care and physician-assisted dying, please visit our website: <https://beta.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/ethics/end-of-life/the-bmas-position-on-physician-assisted-dying>



the unique relationship between doctors and patients might be jeopardised if doctors were permitted to play a role in ending patients' lives.

- **Assisted dying could have a negative impact on the doctor-patient relationship.** Changing the law to permit assisted dying could cause some to fear doctors and medical settings – particularly more vulnerable individuals, such as the elderly, disabled, or those who see themselves as a burden.
- **Permitting assisted dying for some could put vulnerable people at risk of harm,** by altering society's attitudes towards the elderly or disabled, or by making assisted dying an option people feel under pressure to consider.
- **High quality palliative care services should be consistently and widely available** for those who need them, and the public should be better informed about such services.<sup>3</sup> The BMA believes that effective and high-quality palliative care can effectively alleviate distressing symptoms associated with the process of dying, for most patients.

### BMA member survey

In February, we will be surveying all our members about their views on what position the BMA should take – whether that is maintaining a position of opposition, or shifting to a supportive or neutral position regarding a change in the law. This work has arisen due to a successful motion at the BMA's Annual Representative Meeting (ARM) last year (our annual policy-making conference), which requested we undertake this survey of our members' views.

The results of the survey, which will be published ahead of this year's ARM, will not determine BMA policy. Instead, the findings from the survey will provide our representatives attending this year's policy-making conference with valuable insights into the wider membership's views on physician-assisted dying – and, ultimately, contribute to a discussion and debate on BMA policy.

For more information about our survey on the BMA's position on physician-assisted dying, please visit our website: [www.bma.org.uk/PAD](http://www.bma.org.uk/PAD)

This web hub also contains a **range of publicly accessible briefing materials** to inform our members before they take part in the survey, including:

- Information about the law in the UK and how it was developed
- An overview of the law in jurisdictions internationally where physician-assisted dying is permitted
- An overview of recent surveys of medical and public opinion on physician-assisted dying
- Some of the arguments used by supporters and opponents of physician-assisted dying, as well as examples of arguments used for and against the BMA adopting a neutral position.

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<sup>3</sup> The BMA has recently briefed in support of the *Access to Palliative Care Bill 2017-19* to provide equitable access to palliative care services across the country.