

# **Pre-ARM briefing**

## Physician-assisted dying



## Pre-ARM briefing – Physician-assisted dying

This briefing:

- outlines the questions being put to members in the survey on physician-assisted dying;
- identifies some of the key issues members may wish to consider in developing and submitting motions on physician-assisted dying for the 2020 ARM; and
- signposts to further useful information.

### Background

We are currently surveying all BMA members to ask their views on what the BMA's position on physician-assisted dying should be. This follows a motion that was passed at the 2019 ARM which called on the BMA to "carry out a poll of its members to ascertain their views on whether the BMA should adopt a neutral position with respect to a change in the law on assisted dying". The BMA is currently opposed to physician-assisted dying in all its forms, a position set in 2006 and reaffirmed in 2016.

The results of the survey will not determine policy. Rather, they will be published ahead of this year's ARM and provided to those attending to help them make an informed decision about the BMA's policy position.

Information from the survey will also help the BMA to respond to any future legislative proposals and put us in a much stronger position to represent the professional interests and concerns of members in the event of any future legal change.

The information in this briefing should be read in light of the survey questions being put to members (which you should receive by 11 February, at the latest) and the briefing materials provided to members ahead of the survey (available at [www.bma.org.uk/PAD](http://www.bma.org.uk/PAD))

### What is physician-assisted dying?

Physician-assisted dying refers to doctors' involvement in measures intentionally designed to end a patient's life. In the survey, we ask questions which cover two distinct scenarios:

1. Situations where doctors would prescribe lethal drugs at the voluntary request of an adult patient with capacity, who meets defined eligibility criteria, to enable that patient to self-administer the drugs to end their own life. This is sometimes referred to as **physician-assisted dying** or **physician-assisted suicide**.
2. Situations where doctors would administer lethal drugs at the voluntary request of an adult patient with capacity, who meets defined eligibility criteria, with the intention of ending that patient's life. This is often referred to as **voluntary euthanasia**.

All forms of physician-assisted dying are illegal in the UK, but the exact source of that prohibition differs between England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. There have been various attempts in recent years to change the law in England and Wales through bills debated in Westminster, and in Scotland through the Scottish Parliament. There have been no attempts to change the law in Northern Ireland.

### What are we asking members?

The survey asks members about:

- what the BMA's position should be – supportive, neutral, or opposed – in relation to each scenario outlined above;
- their personal views on physician-assisted dying;
- their willingness to be involved, if there were to be proposals to change the law in the future;
- how the BMA should respond in the event of any future proposals to change the law in future, including on what the role of the medical profession should be and on patient eligibility criteria; and
- the availability of a conscientious objection clause.

You can refer to the questions in full in the survey itself.

### Further information

- A briefing pack prepared for members ahead of the survey provides more detailed information about:
  - the law on physician-assisted dying in all parts of the UK;
  - a history of the development of the law and BMA policy on this issue;
  - where physician-assisted dying is permitted internationally and what the law looks like in those places;
  - some of the arguments used in the debate on physician-assisted dying; and
  - a summary of some other surveys of doctors' and the public's views on this issue.

You can download this pack and listen to an audio discussion of the information at:

[www.bma.org.uk/PAD](http://www.bma.org.uk/PAD).

- You can refer to the reports of the BMA research on end-of-life care and physician-assisted dying from 2015, available at [www.bma.org.uk/endoflifecare](http://www.bma.org.uk/endoflifecare).
- You can find out more about the survey and how to get involved at [www.bma.org.uk/PAD](http://www.bma.org.uk/PAD).

### Key issues to consider

The results of the survey will be published ahead of the ARM, and representatives attending the meeting will be able to consider and reflect on these when debating motions.

In submitting motions to the ARM, members may wish to make proposals or set out views on the following key issues:

- What should the BMA's policy position on the scenarios outlined above be – opposed, supportive, or neutral?
- If the law were to change in the future, are there specific issues that the BMA should take view on – eg on the role of the medical profession in any process, or patient eligibility for access to physician-assisted dying? What should those views be?
- If the law were to change in the future, what else should the BMA be calling for in order to protect and support doctors and patients?

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