

# Doctors set to fight global abortion referral policy

An ethics policy that demands doctors refer for abortion, even against their conscience, could become a global policy at the next general assembly of the World Medical Association in October.

Catholic and Evangelical doctors in Canada are organizing to oppose the draft policy before it goes to the WMA council meetings in Latvia April 26-28.

“We have asked our members in the Christian Medical and Dental Society to write to the Canadian Medical Society to ask them to lobby on our behalf, to ensure that that change does not get passed,” said Christian Medical and Dental Society of Canada executive director Deacon Larry Worthen.

While a WMA ethics policy would have no legal effect in Canada, the organization’s policies are often a template for future legislation and regulation of the medical profession around the world, said Worthen. WMA policies are also influential in medical schools.

The World Medical Association was set up by British doctors after the Second World War, largely in response to egregious participation in Nazi atrocities by some German doctors. The organization works on human rights and medical ethics in consultation with United Nations bodies such as the World Health Organization.

The new policy requiring doctors to refer seems to echo the must-refer policy of the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics, known by its French acronym FIGO, Worthen said.

The FIGO policy was used by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario to develop its forced-referral policy, which applies to all morally controversial procedures including abortion and assisted suicide.

The CPSO says it has not been consulted on the proposed WMA abortion policy.

“The change to their policy seems consistent with our current policy on referral,” said CPSO spokesperson Jill Hefley.

The CPSO policy has been challenged in court by the Christian Medical and Dental Society in Ontario Superior Court. The court has promised a decision by Jan. 31.

Hefley confirms that the CPSO refers to international policies, such as those of the WMA, when developing its own regulations.

The WMA policy was due for a 10-year review in 2016. WMA staff recommendations left the 2006 policy on abortion largely unchanged. It required that doctors ensure continuity of care for patients who would choose abortion, but not that doctors refer for the procedure.

The working group of committee members has put the WMA secretariat's approach to one side and proposes to limit the scope of ethical objections to abortion.

"Individual doctors have a right to conscientious objection to providing abortion, but that right does not entitle them to impede or deny access to lawful abortion services because it delays care for women, putting their health and life at risk," reads the proposed policy.

"In such cases, the physician must refer the woman to a willing and trained health professional in the same, or another easily accessible health-care facility, in accordance with national law. Where referral is not possible, the physician who objects must provide safe abortion or perform whatever procedure is necessary to save the woman's life and to prevent serious injury to her health."

The working group's proposal would also delete a sentence that reads, "The WMA requires the physician to maintain respect for human life."



**Moira McQueen**

Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute executive director Moira McQueen has brought the proposed guidelines to the attention of both the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Pontifical Academy for Life, but is not hopeful the Vatican will be able to move quickly enough to influence the process.

"The Vatican is a member of the WMA and will oppose any such move," she said.

McQueen also worries about the influence the WMA can have on legislation and national policies around the globe.

"I don't think the WMA does anything other than reflect current trends in these areas, but I think that's important because of the influence it may have on other countries," she said

The WMA refused to answer questions about its draft policy. Canadian Physicians for Life has alerted its members about the proposed change, but would not go on the record at this time.

“Their (the members’) gut sense seems to be that it’s best not to draw media attention to this and to keep this within the medical community for strategic purposes,” said Physicians for Life executive director Faye Sonier.