

## **Bishops' statement: Abortion Referral – An Affront to Conscience**

*Please see below a statement issued on behalf of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference:*

The Oireachtas has begun to debate a bill which proposes to make abortion widely available in Ireland within the coming months. The *Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Bill 2018* poses a very real practical and moral dilemma for healthcare professionals who believe in the fundamental human right to life and in their own responsibility to serve life. In this context our concern for pharmacists, and separately for doctors, nurses and midwives, is as follows:

- The draft legislation envisages that, in the first twelve weeks, abortion generally will be drug induced. This presumes that pharmacists, whether in hospitals or in private practice, will routinely stock and dispense drugs whose specific purpose is to end human life. No provision is made for pharmacists to opt out on the grounds of conscientious objection.
- The draft legislation provides for doctors and nurses to opt out of providing abortion, but requires that, in such cases, they refer the patient to a colleague who will perform the procedure. This requirement may have the appearance of respecting freedom of conscience but, in reality, it requires a healthcare professional to cooperate in what he or she sincerely believes is doing harm to one patient and taking the life of another.

We ask the Government, and wider society, to respect the right of all healthcare professionals and pharmacists to exercise conscientious objection not only by refusing to participate actively in abortion but also by declining to refer their patients to others for abortion. Healthcare professionals, pharmacists and ancillary healthcare workers, should not face legal, professional or financial penalties or any form of discrimination for their commitment to respect life.

In New Zealand, healthcare professionals “opt in” to the provision of abortion if they so wish. In the case of conscientious objection, however, they are not obliged to refer their patients to others for abortion. We believe that the Government, by following this approach, could demonstrate respect for the freedom of conscience of healthcare professionals. We ask politicians, whatever their position on the termination of pregnancy, to work towards this.

The fundamental right to freedom of conscience is recognised in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Conscience is that private space in the heart of every person in which the truth is discovered and accepted. For men and women of faith, conscience is the reflection in their own heart of the voice of God, supported by faith and reason. To strip a person of the right to freedom of conscience is to undermine his or her fundamental dignity as a person.

At this challenging time, we encourage all Catholics to pray for healthcare professionals and to pray for politicians that they, and we too, may have the wisdom to know what is right and the courage to do what is right.

ENDS