Open Letter to the Chair of the Council of the British Medical Association (BMA)

Dear Dr Porter,

In the BMA’s media statement, dated 2 July, in response to an editorial in the BMJ supporting a change in the law on assisted dying, you stated:

The BMA remains firmly opposed to assisted dying. This issue has been regularly debated at the BMA’s policy-forming annual conference and recent calls for a change in the law have persistently been rejected.

We the undersigned, members of both Healthcare Professionals for Assisted Dying and the BMA, reject your assertion as there was no debate at the recent Annual Representatives Meeting in Harrogate and believe this illustrates a failure of the democratic process.

The BMA is opposed to assisted dying, even though 61% of the medical profession believe that their representative bodies should be neutral. The BMA stance also rides roughshod over the views of the general public, 80% of whom are in favour of assisted dying.

At the recent ARM, despite 12 motions being submitted calling for a survey of the views of its members on the issue of neutrality (i.e. to find out what doctors actually think rather than what the leadership believes that they should think) not one was selected for debate.

In her Presidential address, Baroness Finlay, who is a leading opponent of legalising assisted dying for the terminally ill, misled the BMA membership when she stated that Lord Falconer’s Assisted Dying Bill has no safeguards. In fact it has a wide range of safeguards.

While the issue of assisted dying is important, the democratic deficit in the BMA is fundamental. It was this deficit that resulted in the failure to mount effective opposition to the Health and Social Care Act despite the wishes of the membership.

How can the BMA claim truly to speak for its 150,000 members on this matter when they continue to refuse to seek their opinion? It appears to be neither transparent nor democratic.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Ray Tallis, Chair of Healthcare Professionals for Assisted Dying

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Dr Gwen Turner, 6379168
Dr Christopher Ward, 6303184
Dr Sarah Wookey, 6775944

2 BSA, 2010 (http://www.dignityindying.org.uk/assisted-dying/public-opinion/)
3 http://www.dignityindying.org.uk/assisted-dying/safeguards/