



Statement from Cardinal Thomas Collins Re: College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario – Policy on Professional Obligations and Human Rights

March 24, 2015

Physicians and health-care providers are beacons of hope in our province and country. Drawn to this noble vocation out of a desire to serve those in need of healing, all of them, whatever their personal commitment to faith may be, have the right to act according to their conscience. And we all have a right to expect that those caring for us in our times of greatest need will be people of conscience.

Physicians and other health-care workers are often motivated by their deeply held religious beliefs. That was true of the founders of health care in Ontario, such as the Religious Sisters in the Catholic Church and faithful believers of other churches. To this day, in hospitals and in private practice, many medical professionals of different religious traditions are guided by their faith as they offer compassionate care to those who are suffering.

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario has recently amended its policy regarding “Professional Obligations and Human Rights”. In the section concerning limiting service for reasons of conscience or religious beliefs, the policy states:

“Where physicians are unwilling to provide certain elements of care for reasons of conscience or religion, an effective referral to another health-care provider must be provided to the patient.”

While the College may consider this to be a reasonable policy, it places an unjust burden upon physicians who are unwilling to be complicit in procedures to which they object for reasons of conscience or faith. Although exempted from personally doing the procedure, they are nonetheless forced to arrange for it to be done by another. That is not just. There are physicians from many diverse faith communities who will be unable to provide such referrals, since doing so will contravene both their religious beliefs and their conscience. For physicians of no faith the policy contravenes their conscience, if they object to the procedure for reasons of conscience.

As Archbishop of Toronto, I pastorally care for the approximately 1.9 million Catholics in the Archdiocese of Toronto, and have the responsibility to provide authoritative guidance concerning the faith of the Catholic Church. Catholic moral teaching affirms that medical procedures such as contraception, sterilization, in-vitro fertilization, artificial insemination, abortion, physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia are contrary to the dignity of the human person, and are contrary to Catholic faith.

For Catholic physicians and health-care workers, Catholic moral teaching provides normative guidance for their conscience. By insisting they provide an effective referral on these matters, in essence, the physician is being asked to serve as an accomplice in the procedure. It is clear that such physicians no longer enjoy freedom of conscience or religion in the profession to which they have dedicated their life’s work.

Surely, there is a way, as was the case with previous policies, to find a just balance between the rights of physicians and those of patients, where one does not trump the other. The cruel irony of the revised policy is that it will inevitably threaten the livelihood of physicians who entered the field because of their religious convictions.

For years, doctors with deeply held religious beliefs have been able to care for their patients with compassion and medical expertise; their tireless service rooted in competence and conscience has been a treasure for our community, especially for the most vulnerable. Thousands of submissions in the consultation expressed concern about such physicians being forced to provide effective referrals through which they are made to be complicit in actions to which in conscience they object. It appears, however, those expressions of concern have fallen on deaf ears.

It is my view that any health-care provider forced to provide an “effective” referral or perform a procedure contrary to his or her religious beliefs or conscience, no longer enjoys freedom of religion or freedom of conscience, as enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. I have grave concerns about the plight of Catholic physicians, health-care workers and all of those motivated by their religious beliefs.