

DIFFICULT NEWS FOR PHARMACISTS ON CONSCIENCE

UK GUIDELINES MAY STRIP PHARMACISTS OF CONSCIENCE RIGHTS ON MORNING AFTER PILL



New guidelines issued by the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC) could result in pharmacists who refuse to dispense the post coital contraceptive pill losing their job.

In paragraph 3.4 the guidelines state that pharmacists must “Make sure that if your religious or moral beliefs prevent you from providing a service, you tell the relevant people or authorities and refer patients and the public to other providers”

This is problematic for many reasons. Firstly the guidance fails to recognise that religious views are not the only values that may affect judgements. Those who lack belief, or who lack moral values may be equally or more likely to impose their views upon

patients.

Secondly, it is very clear that a pharmacist must live according to their conscience. An instruction to do something wrong was not a defence at Nurnberg [ref] and no person may do anything that they believe to be fundamentally wrong. Of course in that case, any pharmacist can (as many do) simply tell the person that they can find the service from another place. This is not obstruction, but allows the duty of conscience to be afforded to the pharmacist.

Faced with this guidance, a pharmacist is asked by the GPhC to participate in referral when a woman seeks an abortifacient drug, making it hard for that pharmacist to work without a compromise of conscience. Remember, of course, that a Catholic pharmacist, as with a Catholic doctor or nurse, will, while bringing with them a refusal to participate in some things, bring other strengths to their work as a result of their faith. DoH policy on valuing diversity suggests that such diversity should be valued and not rejected.

It is very sad therefore that the GPhC has acted thus. The policy is due for review within a year.

The CMA(UK) told us that all Catholic healthcare professionals have the right to practice according to their conscience and that the Equality and Diversity policy within the NHS should actively support this. Concerning pharmacists and the MAP (and the COCP) we note the guidance is subject to review and trust that this will improve matters.

Reference

General Pharmaceutical Council. Standards of conduct, ethics and performance

[http://www.pharmacyregulation.org/sites/default/files/Standards of conduct, ethics and performance.pdf](http://www.pharmacyregulation.org/sites/default/files/Standards_of_conduct,_ethics_and_performance.pdf)