

## **Update for members, 13<sup>th</sup> February 2014**

### **Protection of Life during Pregnancy Act 2013**

Dr. Philip Crowley, the HSE's National Director of Quality and Patient Safety, requested a meeting with the College in the context of the enactment of the Protection of Life during Pregnancy Act 2013.

A delegation from the College met with Dr Crowley on 4<sup>th</sup> February in his office in Dr Steeven's Hospital. Dr. Crowley was accompanied by Mr. Martin Rogan from the HSE's Mental Health Directorate.

The College delegation made the following points:

- The key issue for the College is that people presenting in psychological distress for any reason must get a full assessment and appropriate intervention for their mental health problems.
- The concern of the College members at the vacuum that currently exists due to the lack of guidelines on the processes delineated in the Act as regards Psychiatrists.
- The resource implications that the enactment of the Act carries for mental health services and individual Psychiatrists in a situation where mental health services are already under resourced.
- The problems that will present in getting appropriately qualified Psychiatrists to make themselves available to give a second opinion as required by the Act. Getting a first opinion on the specific questions raised by the legislation may also be a problem in General Adult and in Child and Adolescent Services.
- The problems that will present in getting appropriately qualified Psychiatrists to join Panels as required by the Act.
- The importance of ensuring that all medical practitioners who may assess pregnant women presenting with psychological distress are in a position to recognise mental health problems and recommend appropriate interventions.
- The fact that the College is a group of Professionals and is not in a position to require members to take part in activities except in regard to the general educational requirements of their on-going registration as medical practitioners.

Other issues discussed included the impact that individual medical practitioner's personal beliefs might have on the implementation of the Act. The delegation pointed out that such issues and the duties of medical practitioners in general are dealt with by the Medical Council's Guide to Professional Conduct and Ethics and that all practicing Psychiatrists are well aware of their duties to patients.

Dr. Crowley agreed the validity of all the points made. He especially agreed with the primacy of ensuring access to appropriate assessment and intervention for any person presenting with physical and/or psychological distress. He asked for the College's assistance in building the Panel of Psychiatrists with sufficient numbers required by the Act. He agreed that it is impossible for further developments to take place in the absence of workable guidelines.

The delegation pointed out that the College is not in a position to require members to take part in activities. Dr Crowley understood this. They stressed that the College's main remit is as a lifelong educator of Psychiatrists, a role which brings responsibilities in many areas. These responsibilities must include that it offer its members appropriate and sufficient education on the issues of mental health in pregnancy to ensure that all members are in a position to deliver appropriate assessments and advice to pregnant women who are experiencing psychological distress. The College also has a responsibility to members to ensure that all members have sufficient information to make a decision as regard the role they, individually, wish to play in the context and activities of the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act. The College also has a role in educating other medical specialists in the issues of mental health in pregnancy.

The delegation thus offered to begin a process with the Institute of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists that will promptly lead to the establishment of training courses. The content will include the clinical, legal and ethical issues relevant to medical practitioners in regard to mental health in pregnancy, the individual medical practitioner's responsibilities and their role in the Protection of Life during Pregnancy Act. Clearly progress on this will depend on the guidelines for the Act being published. Dr Crowley will seek funding to support the development and delivery of such educational activities.

Further meetings will follow as necessary.

**Dr John Hillery**

**Director of Communications and Public Education**