



European Humanist Federation

international non-profit association under Belgian law

Fédération Humaniste Européenne

association internationale sans but lucratif de droit belge

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Dear Party President / Vice-President

The European Humanist Federation (EHF) is an international non-profit organisation registered in Belgium in 1992. Its objects are "to promote secularism and a humanist vision of cultural, social and ethical values in Europe and to work for social and cultural progress." It unites over 40 organisations in twenty countries across Europe, with contacts in many more.

We urge you to support a resolution to be put to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on October 7 which touches on fundamental freedoms, particularly those of women. It comes from its Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee and concerns the way that the unregulated use of conscientious objection in health services is resulting in denial of lawful services to patients. The resolution and the report on which it is based are at <http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc10/EDOC12347.pdf>.

The draft resolution in our view adopts a balanced and moderate approach to an emerging problem affecting free access by women to lawful medical care. The right to conscientious objection is valuable but when it is widely exercised the authorities need to ensure that it does not result in a denial of services to women entitled to them.

There are signs of widespread and systematic use of conscientious objection being organised by religious interests seeking to frustrate the proper operation of democratically made laws by pressurising physicians, nurses and pharmacists (for example) to opt out of providing certain services more as a religious gesture than as a genuinely felt conscientious objection. For example, in the Belgian town of Mechelen medical staff who had previously willingly carried out abortions entered conscientious objections only when their hospitals came under the control of the Roman Catholic Church.

For this reason it is necessary to prepare regulations to ensure - by (for example) advance declarations of objections and by requirements to refer patients - that services remain available to those who want them. Otherwise the use of conscientious objection risks frustrating the right of women to control their bodies.

There is evidence that the churches and the Vatican in particular are campaigning against the draft resolution, sometimes with little regard for accuracy or truth. At a meeting on September 15 the cross-party European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics heard Mrs McCafferty (who drafted the report for the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee) describe the pressures she

faces and the false information that is being deliberately disseminated about her report (her speech is at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFIWzGcOjaY>).

The EHF invites you to support the resolution which urges member states to develop rules to regulate conscientious objection in health care and medical services including reproductive health services.

May we finally remind you that when conscientious objection was first legally recognised, it was in the area of military service. Those who entered objections were not merely sent home to continue their lives: they were required to carry out other public services or else they were sent to prison. Conscientious objection, however desirable, should not be a free ticket to avoiding one's duty.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "David Pollock", with a horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David Pollock
President