Briefing to accompany ‘Guidance for those undertaking or recertifying FSRH qualifications whose personal beliefs conflict with the provision of abortion or any method of contraception’.

This briefing is designed to be read alongside the newly issued ‘Guidance for those undertaking or recertifying FSRH qualifications whose personal beliefs conflict with the provision of abortion or any method of contraception’ (‘personal beliefs guidance’). This guidance replaces the former ‘Guidelines Relating to FSRH Diploma Trainees (DFSRH / NDFSRH) who Express Conscientious Objections’.

Why has the FSRH revised its guidelines related to conscientious objection and personal beliefs?

The FSRH recognises that there is a broad range of views among its 15,000 plus members and trainees towards abortion care and some forms of contraception. As well as wanting to ensure that the Guidelines are based on current law and take into account guidance from the GMC and NMC, the FSRH wanted to ensure that it had taken into account this range of views and experiences. The process has been a very positive one for the Faculty, enabling the Council (trustees) to take a highly considered view on this issue. As a professional membership body focusing on improving standards in sexual and reproductive health, the Faculty feels that it is important that it takes a considered and visible stance on this issue. In addition, the FSRH wanted to ensure that it is putting the needs of patients/women at the heart of its approach to care, recognising the importance of access to SRH as a key part of their lives.

Who is the revised Guidance aimed at?

The revised guidance is aimed at healthcare professionals (HCPs) who are considering undertaking or recertifying any of the FSRH qualifications, including the Diploma, Membership exam and the Specialty Training Programme of Community Sexual and Reproductive Health (CSRH). In particular it is aimed at anyone who has a religious or other reservation about provision of any aspect of sexual and reproductive healthcare. However, we would encourage all HCPs considering taking a qualification (or recertifying) with the FSRH to read the Guidance as it may impact on a colleague or service they are involved in.

What is the FSRH’s position on conscientious objection?

The FSRH has published Guidelines for potential trainees who express conscientious objections since 1999. These Guidelines have set out the Faculty’s position for doctors (and, since 2014, nurses) and have always recognised the legal right of HCPs to opt out of aspects of abortion care.

While continuing to recognise and support this right, the updated Guidance asks all those undergoing training (or recertifying) with the FSRH to demonstrate their commitment to abiding by a set of ‘principles of care’ outlined in the Guidance. They will also need to ensure that they can meet the standards – theory and clinical – required to pass the relevant assessment and any subsequent recertification cycles. Each FSRH qualification has a different curriculum and set of standards/assessments linked to the competency level it is designed to recognise. The syllabi of the FSRH qualifications are defined by the sexual and reproductive health needs of women and men, the currently available therapies and accepted best clinical practice within the UK law.
Can a doctor or nurse do the FSRH Diploma if s/he has a conscientious objection?

HCPs who plan to opt out of providing aspects of care because of their personal beliefs may still be awarded the Diploma, or recertified, if they can abide by the principles of care set out in the Guidance and pass the assessment(s). For example, if a HCP chooses not to prescribe emergency contraception because of her/his personal beliefs, s/he has a personal responsibility to ensure that arrangements are made for a prescription to be issued by a colleague without delay, ensuring that the care and outcomes of the patient are never compromised or delayed. The FSRH will be asking HCPs to sign up to abiding by these principles of care when they take or recertify their FSRH qualification(s).

What about other FSRH qualifications?

For all other FSRH qualifications, the prospective trainee must study the curriculum to establish if s/he can fulfil the requirements. More detail is set out in the Guidance. To fulfil the requirements for the CSRH Specialty Training Programme, a doctor must be willing to participate in the provision of all forms of care excepting that which is defined as conscientious objection in the Abortion Act 1967, as amended by the Human Fertilisation & Embryology Act 1990.

What if a HCP changes their views?

The FSRH recognises that the personal beliefs of individual HCPs may change during the course of their studies or career. The Guidance recommends that HCPs review and discuss their personal beliefs and the impact they may have on patient care at their work-based annual appraisal or equivalent. Trainees undergoing a FSRH qualification will also be encouraged to discuss their views with their Faculty trainer.

How can I comment on this policy?

The FSRH will keep this policy under regular review. Views on this policy are welcome and can be sent to Jane Hatfield on chiefexec@fsrh.org

FSRH
April 2017
What is the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare (FSRH)?

The Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare is a faculty of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) and an independent charity in its own right whose aims include advancing the education and training of healthcare practitioners in the fields of sexual and reproductive healthcare. The Faculty has been in existence for 23 years and has a membership of over 15,000 doctors and nurses, the majority of whom are GPs. Our membership includes healthcare professionals with a broad range of moral, religious and ethical views and this has always been recognised and welcomed. The Faculty admitted nurses into full membership in 2014 to reflect their role in delivering high quality sexual and reproductive health services in the UK.

What qualifications does the FSRH award?

The Faculty awards qualifications on the basis of individual healthcare practitioners demonstrating fulfilment of the published syllabi. Its qualifications are nationally recognised in the UK, ensuring individuals and couples receive high quality sexual and reproductive health care (SRH). These qualifications include a Diploma in Sexual and Reproductive Health – open to nurses or doctors who want to demonstrate their ability to provide comprehensive, community-based consultations in SRH, Letters of Competence in Intrauterine Techniques and Subdermal Contraceptive Implant Techniques and the relatively new medical speciality of community Sexual and Reproductive Health – a General Medical Council approved and quality assured six-year training programme for doctors. In addition, the FSRH awards Special Skills Modules in specific areas of SRH care including Menopause, Abortion Care and Ultrasound.

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