

Doctors' new code of conduct acts like the 'thought police'

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The Medical Board of Australia is drafting a revised code of conduct for doctors that is being attacked for “thought policing the medical profession” and raising a barrier to free speech.

The code will affect all registered doctors in the country and breaches will result in disciplinary action, including the prospect of deregistration.

Health Minister Greg Hunt is being sent letters of complaint over a key section of the proposed code.

The Australian Medical Association provided a statement to *The Weekend Australians* saying it was “aware that some people have raised concerns” about a section of the draft code relating to public commentary from doctors on ethical issues.

“The AMA submission will ask the Medical Board to address and clarify these concerns,” the statement said. “The medical profession is a broad church and its members hold a range of views on ethical issues.”

The AMA’s “position statement on euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide” says doctors should “not be involved in interventions that have as their primary intention the ending of a person’s life”.

The new code has raised concerns that doctors speaking out in favour of euthanasia could fall foul of the code. The AMA said it was aware there were “divergent views within the medical profession” in relation to the subject.

Chris Middleton, a former president of the Tasmanian AMA, said he was also concerned that the code would inhibit free speech and stifle public discussion of issues including euthanasia, abortion and gender dysphoria.

The relevant section of the code — found at section 2.1 — states: “If making public comment, you should acknowledge the profession’s generally accepted views and indicate when your personal opinion differs.

“Behaviour which could undermine community trust in the profession is at odds with good medical practice and may be considered unprofessional.”

Dr Middleton, who last year joined several AMA members in writing a 15-page report savaging the credibility of the national body’s “position

statement on marriage equality”, warned that the effect of the proposed section would be to silence minority views.

“If you have an alternative view and you dare to mention it in public, you could be deregistered,” he told *The Weekend Australian*. “The inclusion of this provision will have a chilling effect on free speech and the inclination of individual doctors to contribute to the public discourse on potentially contentious issues.

“Obvious examples would include abortion, euthanasia, gender dysphoria and medical conscientious objection.”

The Australian Christian Lobby has written a letter to Mr Hunt expressing alarm about the code of conduct, arguing that it could “unjustly regulate - doctors’ freedom of speech and conscience”.

ACL managing director Martyn Iles told *The Weekend Australian*: “The code will almost certainly lead to the thought policing of the medical profession”.

“It reaches into what doctors say in their private lives and it muzzles their professional opinions. We must not underestimate the desire of activists to punish people who don’t have politically correct opinions and, if the code comes into effect, doctors who think differently about such issues will come under attack,” he said.