

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**Closing Remarks by Chairperson, Ms. Justice Mary Laffoy,
at the third meeting of the Citizens' Assembly
on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution**

The Grand Hotel, Malahide, Sunday 5 February, 2017

Good afternoon everyone.

We are now over half way through our consideration of the Eighth Amendment.

Focus of our work to date

To date, our work has focussed on providing the Members with the information needed to be able to make informed recommendations to the Oireachtas on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution.

We have consistently tried to put the medical and legal material before you in a factual, neutral and balanced manner.

This balance can be difficult to achieve in such a highly contested and controversial area. However I want to assure everybody that the pursuit of balance has been fundamental to our work programme to date.

The work programme has been informed by advice from the Expert Advisory Group and their ongoing analysis of the issues together with myself and the Secretariat. Feedback from you the Members on the issues you wish to hear about has also been of huge importance,

particularly in terms of deciding how best to use the time we have available to us.

In considering the overall approach to our work programme, and in particular when deciding on the correct sequence of the material to be put before you, it was important to me that the Members be first presented with the factual underlay of the issues which could arise in relation to the Eighth Amendment.

I decided to do this by selecting speakers who were highly experienced and expert in their field, but who had not expressed a viewpoint or a position on the Eighth Amendment. I also set out to ensure that speakers with connections to organisations which are regarded as promoting one side of the issues would be asked to present a factual narrative of the position on the ground.

This has meant that for the most part, Members have been able to listen to the material put before them in the knowledge that the speaker is not coming with a bias or an agenda and that the information is balanced.

This approach has, I think, being novel in this debate and has served the Members and the wider public watching the Assembly well.

I am firmly of the view that it was important to establish this baseline of medical and legal knowledge for the Members, before the Members would begin to hear contested viewpoints.

Members will be aware however that in a number of ethics sessions, including the session from this morning, we have begun to put both sides of the abortion debate before you.

I feel that this has been a useful way to introduce you to some of the arguments presented from the pro-choice and pro-life side in a way that is calm, reasonable and measured.

Work Programme for Remaining Weekends

As I said previously we are beyond the half way point and now we must look towards the remaining work programme. At the March meeting we will spend some time addressing a number of outstanding legal issues identified by Members as gaps in the material we have put before them today.

It is important that as much legal clarity as possible can be provided to you before we begin to think about recommendations in the fifth weekend.

Since the first meeting of the Citizens' Assembly on the Eighth Amendment, the Members have consistently said that they want to hear directly from women who have been affected by the Eighth Amendment.

Hearing personal testimony like this is important as it allows the citizens the opportunity to hear first-hand about how the matters they are discussing at these weekends affect women and their families.

Therefore at the March meeting of the Assembly, we will be hearing directly from women who have been affected by the Eighth Amendment.

In presenting this testimony and in making the necessary arrangements for it, we have been guided by a number of key principles including that the women who offer to share their stories are dealt with sensitively and

compassionately; and that the stories put before the Assembly are balanced.

It is clear that personal testimony can be very compelling and may speak to individual members of the Assembly in a way that medical, legal or ethics experts cannot. For this reason, it is essential that the personal stories provide the members with experience across a spectrum of circumstances.

Following this, the Assembly will hear from Advocacy Groups.

Submissions were received from a wide range of advocacy groups and other interest/representative organisations. Publication of these was prioritised and they are now available online. A full list was circulated to all Members.

Over the course of this weekend Members were asked to indicate which groups they would like to present to the Assembly, and were asked to list three advocacy groups, on both sides of the debate, they would like to hear oral presentations from.

Based on this an agenda of speakers for the weekend will be drawn up by the Secretariat early next week. In order to ensure balance, both on the day and balance in the overall programme, the final decision on which groups will be invited will be made by me as Chair.

As I have said before, our final weekend on the Eighth Amendment in April will focus on making recommendations to the Oireachtas.

Submissions

Before I conclude I would like to say something briefly about the submissions process. Publication of submissions is ongoing and over 7,000 (check before delivery) submissions have already been published on the website. Publication is being done in chronological order and the secretariat is now publishing the online submissions received on the last day of the process. On that day alone over 3,000 submissions were received online. Simultaneously the Secretariat is now publishing the submissions received by post on the 15th and 16th December, the last two days before the deadline, when over 3,000 individual postal submissions were received.

As yesterday morning's discussion on the submissions has shown the random selection has invoked a range of views among the citizens. Having said that I have no doubt that in hearing the different perspectives and widening their overall knowledge of the issues the Members have benefitted. We will dedicate a further session to the submissions at the March meeting and give further consideration to how they may be utilised to inform the process overall.

On that note I will conclude the Assembly's proceedings today. All that is left for me to say is to thank each and every one of our Members for their contribution this weekend and to say I look forward to seeing you all at our next meeting on 4th and 5th March.

ENDS