

15 September 2016

**Subject: First Croatian Congress in Forensic Gynaecology and Perinatology Organised Under the Auspices of High-ranking Catholic Church Officials**

Tomorrow is the first day of the First Croatian Congress in Forensic Gynaecology and Perinatology with International Participation. While this fact is a seemingly commendable one, given that it would indicate that the research and scientific-investigation competencies of medical profession in Croatia is growing, this is unfortunately only part of the story.

The Congress is being organised under the auspices of the President of the Republic of Croatia as well as Cardinal Josip Bozanić and Bishop Vlado Košić, high-ranking officials from the Catholic Church in Croatia. These men will also be opening the Congress itself, although the program does not detail which of them will be doing so.

Both Bozanić and Košić are very vocal opponents of sexual and reproductive health rights, and have been working tirelessly over the past ten years to ensure that women in Croatia have great difficulties in accessing comprehensive health information, family planning support, contraception, on-demand abortion all the while ignoring the everyday routines of Croatian maternity hospitals, lack of informed consent for women accessing maternity services and lack of transparency and accurate patient records.

Also worrisome is the fact that other organisations have also conferred their sponsorship and auspices to the event. These include the Croatian Medical Chamber and the Croatian Chamber of Midwives, while organisers and co-organisers include the Sv. Duh Clinical Hospital in Zagreb, The Croatian Academy of Medical Science, the Croatian Gynaecology and Obstetrics Society, the Croatian Society for Medical Ethics and Deontology, Expert and Court-Appointed Expert Professional Association, the Croatian Association of Hospital Physicians and more.

The fact that high-ranking officials of a religious denomination that is so vehemently against women having the (human) right to informed consent about decisions about their bodies casts a very ugly shadow on the entire event, on the professional and scientific integrity of the event organisers, their institutions, and the hundreds of gynaecologists, obstetricians, midwives and nurses whose resounding silence legitimises these facts.

The rights to bodily integrity, informed consent and refusal are human rights that cannot be taken lightly. By casting them aside to gain the favour of powerful religious leaders, gynaecologist-obstetricians have shown that their allegiance and loyalty lies with powerful institutions, not with the women who they provide healthcare to. Moreover, it casts a shadow of doubt on every piece of advice a gynaecologist gives his/her patients, making them question their healthcare provider's true motives.

Healthcare decisions are in the domain of every individual patient, at the advice and in agreement with their chosen healthcare provider. By choosing power over patients, Croatian gynaecologists and obstetricians are also choosing to maintain the currently dangerous status quo where access to scientifically-proven reproductive healthcare is severely restricted, compromising patient and population health.

We call on international professional bodies to openly condemn the professional degradation and lack of professional ethics shown by their Croatian colleagues, and to communicate in no uncertain terms that the professional allegiance of a physician should be with his/her patients, not with religious organisations.

Sincerely,

Roda – Parents in Action

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Copies sent to:

All sponsors of the First Croatian Congress on Forensic Gynecology and Perinatology

Croatian Ministry of Health

FIGO Secretariat (UK)

WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen