



## FACULTY OF PAEDIATRICS

ROYAL COLLEGE OF  
PHYSICIANS OF IRELAND

Royal College of Physicians of Ireland  
Frederick House  
19 South Frederick Street, Dublin 2  
Telephone: +353 1 863 9700  
Facsimile: +353 1 672 4707  
Website: www.rcpi.ie

Minister Charlie Flanagan,  
Department of Justice and Equality,  
St Stephen's Green,  
Dublin 2

13 March 2018

### RE: General Data Protection Regulation - GDPR

Dear Minister Flanagan

On behalf of the board of The Faculty of Paediatrics\* at the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland I write to express our concern regarding the proposal to set the Irish digital age of consent at the lower limit of 13 years. The Faculty of Paediatrics advocate for it to be set at the higher limit of 16 years (the EU default age), to protect children and support their parents. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this important issue with you as soon as possible.

We note the following reasons to support the digital age of consent being set at the higher limit of 16 years:

**1. Child Protection:**

Paediatricians in Ireland, particularly those specialising in child protection and child sexual abuse, are concerned about the recent reports of children being groomed online increasing the risk of child sexual abuse.

**2. Comprehension of risks:**

It is recognised in the GDPR that children and teenagers merit special protection regarding their personal data; a child may lack comprehension of the significant risks and consequences of sharing personal data, including photographs. Similarly, children may not have the judgement/maturity to understand the consequences of inappropriate disclosure of feelings and personal thoughts on the internet. This behaviour may lead to significant feelings of regret, worry and anxiety.

**3. Mental health and wellbeing:**

Concern is rising as evidence is emerging of the negative impact that the use of electronic devices may be having on the mental health of children and young people. Teachers, GPs, paediatricians and psychiatrists are seeing children presenting in increasing numbers with anxiety, sleep deprivation, mood disturbances reported to be related to social media use. There is now much anecdotal evidence that on-line bullying may have a role in self-harming and suicide in our young people.



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**4. Medical age of consent:**

Sixteen years is in line with the minimum age at which a child may consent to medical treatment.

**5. Supporting Parents:**

Parents need to be supported in their efforts to educate, guide and monitor their children's use of the internet and setting the age at 16 will affirm parents in their role and the need to assess their own child's maturity and judgement.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr Ellen Crushell

*Ellen Crushell*

Dean, Faculty of Paediatrics, RCPI

CC. Minister Denis Naughton, Minister for Communications, Climate Action and the Environment

*\*The Faculty of Paediatrics ('the Faculty') at The Royal College of Physicians of Ireland is the national professional and training body for Paediatrics in Ireland, working to ensure the highest standards in child health. We are accredited by the Medical Council of Ireland and are proud to meet the strict standards required to deliver postgraduate specialist training in Paediatrics. We have close to 250 Members, who are experienced Consultant Paediatricians and leading experts in their field and we have 190 paediatric specialty trainees in our training programme.*