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### **Catholic health care called into question**

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SASKATOON — The existence of Catholic health care in Saskatchewan has been called into question as a result of a controversy surrounding a tubal ligation policy at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Humboldt. A revised policy for the Catholic hospital was recently announced, but continues to be a source of debate after the resignation of two doctors.

The policy is in accordance with Catholic teaching about the moral unacceptability of sterilization for the prevention of conception, and cites the Catholic Health Ethics Guide in its preamble. "Sterilization may be permitted when the primary purpose is to benefit the total health of the person," the revised policy states.

The policy was arrived at Dec. 19 after extensive discussion by the Saskatoon Health Region, the St. Elizabeth's Hospital board, the Humboldt physician group, the Saskatchewan Catholic Health Corporation, and the Catholic bishops of Saskatchewan. St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Humboldt is one of nine faith-based institutions across the province owned by the Saskatchewan bishops and administered through the Saskatchewan Catholic Health Corporation and by local boards.

The tubal ligation issue came to the public's attention in June 2006 when the hospital board banned the procedure altogether after learning there was ongoing non-compliance with the existing policy by some doctors. Board chair Jerome Strasser said the board acknowledges that the tubal ligation issue has been a major concern for some people. He notes that in the past, the hospital performed about a dozen tubal ligations a year.

"The Catholic Health Ethics Guide, while not allowing direct sterilization when the primary purpose is the regulation of conception, allows tubal ligations under certain conditions. In fact, doctors in any public hospital also perform tubal ligation only under certain conditions," Strasser said. "St. Elizabeth's Hospital has modified its policy because of a number of factors,

including new legislation regarding human rights and privacy. Our policy remains true to the principles of the ethics guide while allowing the procedure for the total health of the person.”

The essence of the policy, framed as it is in terms of Catholic moral teaching, has not changed, said Saskatoon Bishop Albert LeGatt. “What’s different in this revised policy is the way in which it will be applied,” he said.

A former method of auditing and monitoring policy compliance after the fact, which raised concerns about patient confidentiality, has been replaced with a system of doctor certification, in which physicians state that they understand and are following the policy before certifying the procedure is necessary and appropriate for the total health of the patient, and is not primarily for the purpose of contraception.

The revised policy’s wording and implementation procedure has prompted two Humboldt doctors to resign. Dr. Carrie Levick and Dr. Jacqueline Bourgeois state in letters of resignation that they are unable to work in a facility governed by the Catholic Health Ethics Guide.

A rally opposing the revised tubal ligation policy was held outside the hospital in Humboldt Dec. 21, with doctors and their supporters stating that individual rights should take priority over religious beliefs in an institution supported by tax dollars.

Humboldt city council recently asked the Saskatoon Regional Health Authority to establish a process to resolve issues related to the hospital. Humboldt council has asked for the appointment of a review panel to “provide recommendations based on input from all stakeholders as to the future operational philosophy of the new hospital.”

People in the area need a productive mechanism for expressing concerns, asking questions and getting answers, said Humboldt Mayor Malcolm Eaton.

Arriving at a workable solution will only happen if all the people and organizations in the region are involved in the discussion, he said. “We also need to remain focused on our vision of this community and that vision clearly contains a new hospital.”

As a result of the controversy, the existence of faith-based health care itself has been questioned, with some calling for the removal of St. Elizabeth’s Catholic designation.

Catholic religious orders were among the first organizations to establish and run hospitals in Saskatchewan in the early years of the 20th century. When, in the 1960s, universal health care began to be provided by government, Catholic and other faith-based health care providers were assured that their commitment to providing health care would be respected and that they could continue to provide these services in accordance with their religious values and consciences, explained Bishop LeGatt.

Catholic hospitals have something unique and valuable to offer in terms of health care and healing ministry, LeGatt said. “Catholic health care seeks to provide healing care and compassion to the total person, in response to their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well being.”

Catholic health care institutions have a holistic approach, according to Ann Stewardson of Swift Current, chair of the Saskatchewan Catholic Health Corporation. “We’re concerned with both the body and the spiritual being,” she said, noting that more and more research shows the link of spirituality to health. “Catholic health care strengthens Canada’s health care system.”

According to the World Health Organization, the Roman Catholic Church is the largest single provider of health care on earth, said Strasser.

LeGatt noted that the contribution of Catholic care institutions has been historically recognized in the province, and exists in the Saskatoon Health Region as part of total health care delivery in the region.

However, in order for that Catholic contribution to be meaningful, the institutions owned and operated under the auspices of the Saskatchewan Catholic Health Corporation must be allowed to be truly Catholic in their policy and operation, LeGatt stressed. “A Catholic hospital is to be guided by Catholic teaching and values — including those concerning life issues or human sexuality — and should be free to do so. ”

The Catholic Church teaches that sterilization procedures and all other forms of artificial contraception are morally unacceptable if performed solely for the regulation of conception. This teaching is incorporated into the Catholic Health Association of Canada Health Ethics Guide, subsections #51 and #52, which are referenced in the preamble of the new policy at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, said LeGatt.