



The Catholic Health Association of Canada

**Statement on the March 20, 2004, Papal Address
Regarding**

LIFE SUSTAINING TREATMENT AND THE VEGETATIVE STATE

On March 20, 2004, His Holiness, Pope John Paul II gave an address at an International Congress in Rome organized by the Pontifical Academy for Life and the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations. The theme of the Congress was: “Life-Sustaining Treatment and the Vegetative State: Scientific Advances and Ethical Dilemmas”.

In his address the Holy Father states that “the intrinsic value and personal dignity of every human being do not change, no matter what the concrete circumstances of his or her life... Even our brothers and sisters who find themselves in the clinical condition of a “vegetative state” retain their human dignity in all its fullness.” He reminds us of our responsibility to care for those who are sick and dying and “to support those families who have had one of their loved ones struck down by this terrible clinical condition.” In particular, Pope John Paul affirms:

- Patients in a vegetative state have a right to basic health care and should be given every opportunity for recovery or improvement.
- The withdrawal of artificially administered nutrition and hydration can never be used as a means of ending the lives of these vulnerable persons.

In his remarks, the Holy Father refers to medically administered nutrition and hydration (ANH) as a “natural means of preserving life” and, therefore, as ordinary means and morally obligatory.

Comments

We welcome this teaching presented as an exercise of the ordinary Magisterium by the Roman Pontiff as Pastor of the entire Church. The specific clarifications brought forward by the Holy Father call us to careful study and prayerful discernment to see to their proper application. As we engage this task, we hold in view that “one must... take into account the proper character of every exercise of the Magisterium, considering the extent to which its authority is engaged”. (*Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, May 24, 1990. #17) The specific reference by the Holy Father to medically administered nutrition and hydration as basic care and therefore morally obligatory seems to introduce a new consideration on this issue. For many years, and especially since the interventions of Pope Pius XII, Church teaching has indicated that the ethical decision to withdraw nutrition or hydration is to be determined by weighing the benefits and burdens in a particular clinical situation, always in pursuit of the authentic good and dignity of the patient (cf. *Health Ethics Guide*, #99-101).

For a proper and faithful reception of Church teaching on moral matters we must attend to the differing forms and variant degrees of authority with which the teaching is presented. In the present instance, Pope John Paul presented his remarks in the context of an address given to an International Congress organized by the Pontifical Academy for Life and the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations. This context seems to suggest that the Holy Father intends this important teaching to be received as an exercise of his Ordinary Teaching authority. The statement is not presented as a legislative text.

Our *Health Ethics Guide* was prepared after careful research and submitted for the approval of competent Church authority with the intention to assist and clarify the process of ethical decision-making. The CHAC will continue with diligence to seek a proper and precise understanding of the meaning, intent and application of the Holy Father's address. Until we have further clarification on a correct and thorough understanding of any intended change, the current guidelines remain in effect. Questions of interpretation and application of the Guide should be made in communication with the diocesan bishop.

The CHAC is in dialogue with the CCCB about this issue, and will keep members advised of further developments that may affect patient care.