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CANADIENNE DE LA SANTÉ

CATHOLIC HEALTH
ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Feb. 9, 2000

CHAC Opposes Alberta Plan for Private, For-profit Delivery of Health Care

Ottawa - The Catholic Health Association of Canada (CHAC) has written to the Prime Minister on the occasion of the reopening of Parliament urging him to take action to protect and expand Canada's public health care system.

"Clearly, our system of public health care is beginning to show signs of unravelling," said Mary Pat Skene, CHAC chairperson. "It is being stressed by federal cuts to the provinces under the Canada Health and Social Transfer and by the misguided belief that private, for-profit delivery of health care is the solution to the pressures affecting the public system."

In the letter the CHAC highlights the results of a recent Angus Reid poll which show that 55 per cent of Canadians believe political leaders should make the health system their top priority. That figure represents a jump of 17 percentage points since December, a clear sign that concern about health care is rising.

"Medicare - Canada's publicly funded and publicly administered health care system - represents what is best about Canada - a set of values and beliefs in which the notion of the common good is central. Catholic health care holds strongly to the value which states that health care cannot be treated as a mere commodity to be bought and sold in the marketplace. All governments have the duty to ensure that Medicare is not only preserved but also expanded, and that it remains a publicly funded system governed by the principles of the *Canada Health Act*," said Mrs. Skene.

Of particular concern to the CHAC is the Alberta government's plan to contract-out hospital services to private, for-profit companies, including services now publicly insured. "This is much more than simply looking for ways to deal with waiting lists and with federal funding cuts. This is an attack on the very principles which underlie Canada's national system of public health care. It is a move designed to both legitimize and prepare for a parallel private health care system, with all the increased costs and unequal access which will ensue if the Alberta government succeeds," said Richard Haughian, CHAC President.

The direction proposed by the Alberta government is not new. The intention to create a two-tier health care system is clear in the Working Understanding agreed to by the federal government with Alberta in 1996. The eleventh principle in the agreement allows physicians to remain in the public system while offering additional services not publicly insured for which patients must pay directly, either from their own pocket or through private health care insurance. The 'Alberta

Approach' defined in the Working Understanding violates the spirit and the intent of the *Canada Health Act*.

The CHAC has called on the Prime Minister to take the following measures as first steps in preserving Medicare.

1. The federal government must re-invest a portion of this year's budget in health care to stabilize the system and to begin to support its necessary expansion. An investment of \$1.5 billion in the 2000 budget, as recommended by HEAL (the Health Action Lobby), with a commitment to re-invest this amount annually, would represent an important first step toward achieving these goals. Federal health care transfers need to be channelled through a National Health Care Fund to ensure accountability and transparency. Increased cost-sharing by the federal government will improve access to comprehensive services, reduce waiting lists and strengthen the ability of the federal government to enforce the *Canada Health Act*. Public funds should not be used in for-profit delivery of health care services.
2. The federal government is the guardian of Medicare. It has the ability and the duty to act to prevent the development of two-tier health care in Canada. The Alberta-federal 'Working Understanding' must be rescinded and action must be taken to stop the privatization of publicly insured health care services in Alberta, either through the *Canada Health Act*, through new legislation, or by the federal government in its role as the government responsible for protecting its exemption of health care from the rules of NAFTA.
3. Medicare must be expanded to include home and community care. The recommendation of various organizations that this be achieved through the implementation of a Home and Community Care Act is one that merits serious consideration. Such an act would ensure that provincial reform of health care is designed to meet the changing health needs of Canadians and to stem the increasing privatization of public health care services.
4. The recent WTO (World Trade Organization) meetings revealed a contradiction in the position of the federal government on the question of liberalized trade in services. Health care and social services must be excluded from all trade agreements.

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