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CATHOLIC HEALTH
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NEWS RELEASE

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CHAC Gravely Concerned About Reports of Genetic Abortions

Ottawa - The Catholic Health Association of Canada (CHAC) is gravely concerned about recent media reports related to an unsigned letter and documents that a nurse from the Foothills Hospital in Calgary sent to the magazine *Alberta Report*. In her letter the nurse stated that she and other nurses were being forced to participate in late-term abortions that led to malformed babies being born weeks before their due dates and left to die.

"These allegations raise a number of serious issues," said Mary Pat Skene, CHAC chairperson. The CHAC is opposed to abortion and is shocked by the revelations that are emerging as a result of this news story concerning the practice of late-term abortions - a practice that the Foothills Hospital calls "genetic terminations".

In its story of May 3, *Alberta Report* claimed that the mother of a baby found to be suffering from lethal genetic defects was encouraged to undergo induced labour just five weeks before the baby was due. In using such a practice, the expectation is that the baby will die before he or she is delivered. In this case, the story alleges that the baby was born alive, and that while the child clung to life for 12 hours, the nurses on the ward were forbidden from administering food or liquids. The CHAC support the decision of the Calgary Police Service to initiate a criminal investigation into the death.

Another critical issue at stake is how to protect the right of health care workers to exercise "conscious-objection" when faced with a perceived threat to their religious or moral convictions. "To force health care workers to act against their personal beliefs and values not only creates inner conflict for them; it also is a threat to their personal dignity," said Mrs. Skene.

The CHAC is supportive of Bill S-7, a private Senator's bill currently before the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs. The bill calls for an amendment to the *Criminal Code* to protect the right of health care practitioners and other persons to refuse, without fear of reprisal or other discriminatory coercion, to participate in medical procedures that offend a tenet of their religion, or their belief that human life is inviolable.

"We are also concerned that a trend is developing that will weaken the criteria used in determining whether a late-term abortion can be performed," said Mrs. Skene. The general practice has been that abortions are performed after 20 weeks only if a physician judges that the mother or fetus are in danger of death - a situation that arises very rarely. However,

documents released by Foothills Hospital note that in 1998 21 abortions of babies beyond 20 weeks gestation took place at the hospital. The documents confirm that the abortions were done not only for “lethal” fetal anomalies but also for “serious anomalies.” The CHAC is concerned that in some situations genetic screening is being used not for therapeutic purposes but as a way to identify and abort disabled fetuses. This action is contrary to respect for the unborn and disabled persons.

- 30 -

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