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New Health Ethics Guide Addresses Contemporary Ethical Issues

Ottawa - Ethical issues can appear to be the bailiwick of a small group of experts, something that academics argue about in ivory towers. That is until a member of your family lies dying in a hospital, or a child is in desperate need of an organ transplant, or services are discontinued because of budget cuts. It is these real-life situations that make us realize that ethical questions are faced by everyone.

The Catholic Health Association of Canada (CHAC) recently published its new Health Ethics Guide as a means of addressing such issues. "In preparing the guide we wanted to focus on the people involved in making difficult ethical decisions," stated Dr. Richard Haughian, President of the CHAC. "It is the health and social service professional, the person receiving care and family members who must grapple with the often perplexing questions concerning the best way to proceed."

The most significant factor incorporated in the new guide is the adoption of a broader concept of health. "Health and healing is so much more than being cured or taking medicine," said Dr. Haughian. "There are many factors that determine our health as individuals. Besides the obvious biological and medical factors, our lifestyle, the physical environment, our spiritual well-being, the kind of housing we have, our income, education, employment and social support all influence our overall health."

In 1996 an advisory committee was established to revise the previous guide published in 1991. The revision process included regular meetings and consultation with administrators, ethicists, physicians, nurses, health care and social service providers and a wide range of experts. "While it is important to produce a guide that is aimed at professionals and policy makers, it is also our hope that the Health Ethics Guide will assist anyone who seeks a framework to facilitate sound ethical reflection that leads to informed decision-making," continued Dr. Haughian.

The moral vision of the guide is based on the Christian faith as taught by the Roman Catholic Church. The guide presents fundamental values and principles that underlie the treatment of issues discussed in each of the seven chapters. The articles serve as formulations of contemporary Catholic understanding of how these values are applied in particular situations.

The guide has been approved by the Permanent Council of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The introduction of the guide addresses the everyday context of health and community service providers and those receiving care, highlighting the face-to-face encounter of persons as the privileged place for supporting human dignity. "It is our experience that the healing relationship is the context of ethical reflection. By respecting the dignity of the person, promoting justice and fostering trust, true healing begins," said Dr. Haughian. The book begins by outlining the long tradition of Christian service in health care and the value of ethical reflection and decision-making. "The Christian moral tradition has something to offer that is unique and certainly time-tested," continued Dr. Haughian. "Christian moral values and principles, applied to contemporary health issues, can provide information, guidance and support for anyone faced with ethical questions today."

The *Health Ethics Guide* explores a number of issues under the following chapters: the communal nature of health care, the dignity of the human person, human reproduction, organ and tissue donation and transplantation, care of the dying person, research on human subjects, and governance and administration.