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New National Network Supports Canadians Dealing with Death and Dying

Canadians have a new source of information and support about death and dying with today's launch of the Canadian Virtual Hospice at www.virtualhospice.ca.

The new bilingual website, launched at a news conference at Riverview Health Centre in Winnipeg this morning, provides high quality health information about death and dying, as well as a forum for Canadians to share their experiences with illness or grief.

“People often don’t know what to expect when they learn that they have been diagnosed with a life-limiting illness. They may feel confused, fearful, and uncertain about what lies ahead. If ever they needed information and support, it’s at this stressful time in their lives,” said Dr. Harvey Chochinov, Canada Research Chair in Palliative Care; Director, Manitoba Palliative Care Research Unit, CancerCare Manitoba; and, co-chair of the Canadian Virtual Hospice. “Unfortunately, in our society, matters of death and dying are very often thought to be unspeakable. I hope that the Canadian Virtual Hospice will help patients and families feel more supported and less alone.”

Targeted at patients, their family and friends, health care professionals, and health care volunteers, the Canadian Virtual Hospice is a unique venue for the sharing of credible information and support, eliminating barriers of time and place through the use of the Internet to improve palliative care in Canada.

"The goal of palliative care is to provide comfort and maintain the highest possible quality of life for as long as life remains," said the Honourable Dr. Rey Pagtakhan, Minister for Western Economic Diversification. "The Canadian Virtual Hospice will help people to cope with the pain, distress and many other physical, emotional and spiritual problems that are present with a terminal illness. The Government of Canada is proud to support this important initiative and to build on the Canadian End-of-Life-Care strategy."

"This innovative approach to palliative care will enhance the living of both the patient and their families. Living well until the end is the goal of palliative care. The Canadian Virtual Hospice will make that living easier," said the Honourable Sharon Carstairs, P.C., former Minister with Special Responsibility for Palliative Care.

The Canadian Virtual Hospice provides detailed information about physical symptoms of illness and deals with some of the emotional reactions and spiritual questions often experienced by palliative care patients and their families. The website includes chat rooms, bulletin board discussion areas, and a place for people to email questions to a health care professional. Health care professionals working in the field of palliative care will have the opportunity to share research results and benefit from access to expert opinion from Canadian colleagues.

"This new website will help provide individuals, their families, trained volunteers and health care providers with emotional and spiritual support and practical help for coping with terminal illnesses and grief," said Diane McGifford, minister for Advanced Education and MLA for Lord Roberts. "Manitoba Health is proud to sponsor an initiative that will help so many people."

For more information, contact the Canadian Virtual Hospice co-chairs:

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Background on the Canadian Virtual Hospice

Hospice care, also called palliative care, refers to the physical, emotional, and spiritual care given to people who are dying. The goal of this care is to help people maintain the best possible quality of life throughout their illnesses, so that they may live as fully and as comfortably as possible. The role of the Canadian Virtual Hospice is to provide reliable information and support related to end-of-life care not only to patients, but also to the network of people who support them, including friends and families, health care professionals, and health care volunteers.

The concept of the Canadian Virtual Hospice grew out of a collaboration among Canadian palliative care clinicians, academics, and researchers. Anita Stern and Dr. Harvey Chochinov (co-chairs of the Canadian Virtual Hospice) initially put forward the idea in April 2001. By September 2001 a national executive committee had been formed and a short time later (December 2001), the first meeting was held in Winnipeg. The group confirmed the need to offer Canadians reliable and understandable information related to palliative care. Currently, there is an abundance of information on end-of-life care, but it is not necessarily well organized, easily accessible, or of high quality. At the same time, the group wanted to connect Canadians with a support network of people also experiencing the effects of a life-threatening illness or the death of a loved one.

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In deciding to create a virtual hospice, the working group took into account three realities.

- 1) Canada's population is aging. According to Statistics Canada's analysis of the most recent Census, between 1991 and 2001, the population aged 80 and over soared 41% to 932,000. The number of people aged 80 or over is expected to increase an additional 43% from 2001 to 2011, during which time it will surpass an estimated 1.3 million. Seniors aged 65 or over accounted for 13% of the nation's population in 2001, up from almost 12% in 1991. Projections indicate this proportion will reach 15% by 2011.
- 2) As people age, their health status tends to deteriorate, resulting in an increase in the health care costs they incur. Canada's increasingly elderly population will place financial pressures on the health care system.
- 3) The Internet offers a cost-effective means of providing Canadians with reliable information and support, reaching Canadians who may not otherwise have ready access to end-of-life resources.

Since September 2001, the executive committee of the Canadian Virtual Hospice has overseen the implementation of this new Internet-based network. The executive committee would like to thank all of the Canadian Virtual Hospice's funding partners for providing crucial financial support for the project: Western Economic Diversification Canada (\$500,000); Manitoba Health (\$450,000); Riverview Health Centre in Winnipeg (\$150,000); and, Health Canada, Office of Health and the Information Highway (\$100,000). Winnipeg Regional Health Authority, Riverview Health Centre and CancerCare Manitoba have also made in kind donations.