



Catholic Health Alliance of Canada Alliance catholique canadienne de la santé

The Ethics Network of the Catholic Health Alliance of Canada has developed this framework document, one in a series of ethics resources to support each sponsor organization's response to COVID-19. While it reflects a consensus of opinion of relevant principles and moral approaches to address issues arising during the pandemic, the framework is meant to be adapted to each sponsored organization's unique context and circumstances. For more information, please contact Dr. Hazel Markwell, Theology, Policy and Ethics Advisor at hazel.markwell1@gmail.com

Catholic Health Alliance of Canada Ethics Guidance

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RE: Duty to Provide Care during Covid-19

In past health emergencies, although health care staff have been at risk for exposure to hazards that could affect their health and well-being, they have shown extraordinary commitments to patients and to other staff, sometimes at considerable risk to themselves.

The following guidance is informed by established research on duty to provide care, the Health Ethics Guide (HEG) of the Catholic Health Alliance of Canada, and Catholic social teaching on the common good, solidarity, and the dignity of the human person.

1. Healthcare professionals have a professional, ethical, and legal duty:

- to provide care to patients, treating them with respect, compassion, and dignity (HEG 10, 16). This duty extends to a public health emergency in outbreak conditions;
- to follow established occupational health and safety procedures and protocols
- to report any situation which they reasonably believe presents an imminent and serious danger to life and health (HEG 184)
- to self monitor for signs of illness and, if ill, to protect the public from risk of harm.

These duties are based on the commitments:

- to care and act with compassion (HEG 106)

- to foster trust and solidarity with patients and co-workers (HEG 10)
- to be part of the healing ministry of God, to which all are called through baptism (HEG 7)

Employees should be reminded regularly of these duties and agree to honour them.

2. The duty to provide care may need to be balanced with other duties to self, family, and others.

- In such circumstances, health care workers need to engage in sound ethical decision making (HEG, Appendix I)
- No one may be required to work in a situation where there is an imminent and serious danger to their life and health (HEG 181).
- No one may be required to participate in an activity that in conscience the person considers to be immoral (HEG 26, 165).

No employee should be stigmatized for a decision made in light of the above duty.

Nevertheless, the person receiving care must not be harmed or abandoned (HEG 26).

3. Employers have a reciprocal duty to care and to maximally minimize risk of harm to healthcare employees (HEG 181):

- by providing initial and ongoing training and orientation programs;
- by providing appropriate and a sufficient amount of IPC (Infection Prevention and Control) and PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) supplies (HEG 151);
- by providing staff with all information needed, with regular updates, in order to carry out their duties of care;
- by providing adequate human resources (HEG 151);
- by protecting and supporting employees (HEG 153);
 - e.g., by providing employees with advice on self-assessment and staying at home when ill;
 - by ensuring that employees with preexisting health conditions are not obliged to work in areas of special risk;
 - by ensuring respect for employee vulnerability and conscience;
 - by supporting [financially, psychologically] employees and their families when under quarantine, or when hours of employment are reduced;
 - by protecting the privacy of staff;
 - by ensuring a blame-free environment for employees to report on incidents (HEG 165, 184);
- by fostering an ethical environment (HEG 156);
- by minimizing occupational health and safety risks (HEG 153)

4. Employers / government also have a reciprocal duty to provide care and support for employees and their families, should employees be injured or harmed while carrying out their duties.

5. Refusals to work should be handled in accord with existing occupational health and safety legislation.