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Helping Patients and Families Learn about Palliative and Hospice Care

ST. LOUIS, MO – To mark World Hospice and Palliative Care Day (October 13, 2018), the Catholic Health Association of the United States (CHA) and the Supportive Care Coalition (SCC) are encouraging the public to learn more about the benefits of palliative care to relieve suffering for chronic, life limiting conditions, and about the role of hospice care at the end of life.

They are also highlighting the need for greater access to and awareness of palliative care and hospice services in the United States. While the availability of palliative and hospice care services is growing in the U.S., many patients do not have access to these services and those who do often lack an understanding of how they can benefit from this type of care.

Palliative medicine provides supportive care for people living with serious illness by focusing on relieving physical pain as well as emotional and spiritual distress. A palliative care team of doctors, nurses, social workers, chaplains and others works together to improve the quality of life for both the patient and their loved ones. Palliative care is appropriate at any age and at any stage in a serious illness and can be provided alongside curative treatment. Hospice care is similar to palliative care in that it focuses on keeping the patient comfortable and pain free, both physically, emotionally and spiritually. However, hospice care is typically provided to patients who are near the end of their lives.

“Patients diagnosed with a serious illness, such as cancer, often face daunting treatment options. And while modern medicine is helping prolong life, surgeries and drugs are only part of the healing process. Often as our patients’ physical condition becomes the primary focus, the care for their emotional and spiritual well-being is shortchanged or overlooked. Palliative and hospice care address the needs of the whole person, which is the foundation of Catholic health care,” said Sr. Carol Keehan, President and Chief Executive Officer, CHA.

Palliative care has deep roots in the Catholic moral tradition. In his *Address to Participants in the Plenary of The Pontifical Academy For Life*, in March 2015, Pope Francis stated, “Palliative care is an expression of the truly human attitude of taking care of one another, especially of

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those who suffer. It is a testimony that the human person is always precious, even if marked by illness and old age. Indeed, the person, under any circumstances, is an asset to him/herself and to others and is loved by God. This is why, when their lives become very fragile and the end of their earthly existence approaches, we feel the responsibility to assist and accompany them in the best way.”

“Multiple studies have documented that palliative care improves a person’s quality of life and can even prolong life for some patients, while also lowering overall health care costs as people receive medical care that aligns with their values and goals. Yet, this care is often not readily available, and when available, is still offered too infrequently. We have a long way to go in making ‘what matters to you’ a more important question than ‘what’s the matter with you,’” said Denise Hess, Executive Director, Supportive Care Coalition.

Together, CHA and SCC are advocating for access to high quality palliative care for all who need it and developing resources and tools to improve palliative care programs and increase awareness of its benefits. Three resources designed specifically for patients and their families include:

- *Expressing Your Health Care Wishes* – Answers frequently asked questions about advance directives. Creating an advance directive, which includes designating a health care proxy, is an important step people can take right now to make sure that their wishes are honored if they become ill and are unable to speak for themselves.
- *Caring Even When We Cannot Cure* – Explains the differences between palliative and hospice care.
- *Caring for People at the End of Life* – Explains the Catholic Church’s teaching about end-of-life decisions.

These resources are written from the perspective of Catholic tradition but can be used by people of any religious tradition.

For more information about CHA resources on palliative and hospice care, visit <https://www.chausa.org/palliative-care>.

For more information about SCC, please visit <https://supportivecarecoalition.org>.

For more information about a new partnership between CHA, the Catholic bishops of California, Providence St. Joseph Health and Dignity Health to increase knowledge of and access to high quality palliative care visit <https://www.chausa.org/newsroom/news-releases/2018/08/01/partnership-aims-to-transform-how-catholic-health-care-parishes-care-for-the-sick-and-dying>

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