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Attention News Editors:

## Health Canada wins 4th annual Code of Silence Award

VANCOUVER, May 9 /CNW/ - The Canadian Association of Journalists has awarded Health Canada its fourth annual Code of Silence Award, which recognizes the most secretive government department in Canada. "Government officials everywhere hide vital information that they think might embarrass them, their departments or their political leaders," CAJ president Paul Schneidereit said in announcing the dubious prize. "This award honours their efforts to shroud open government."

"Our finalists have shown remarkable zeal in suppressing information, from concealing vital data about dangerous drugs to snooping through a reporter's bedroom on a witch hunt for whistleblowers."

The winner was announced Saturday as part of the CAJ awards ceremony at the Association's 26th national conference. The Code of Silence award - a plaque featuring a padlock and chains - was accepted on behalf of the federal health department, which did not send a representative to accept it.

Over a period of more than five years, Health Canada denied any meaningful access to a database of prescription drugs that could harm or even kill Canadians. The department refused to release information on adverse drug reactions in a format that would allow researchers to study the records electronically in order to spot trends and identify which drugs are causing problems. For more than five years, the department would only release the information in a computer format that prevented deeper analysis. Meanwhile, adverse drug reaction data like this is readily available in the U.S. In fact, the Food and Drug Administration routinely makes such data available on its website.

The parliamentary all-party standing committee on health eventually slammed the department for failing to effectively protect Canadians who take prescription drugs. The committee said the manner in which drugs are tested and approved is too secretive, in large part due to excessive concerns about the commercial interests of the drug companies. Health Canada finally relented more than five years after it was challenged.

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