Ethical issues in health care and medical research are the focus of the Plunkett Centre for Ethics, a joint research centre of ACU National and St Vincent’s and Mater Health, Sydney, established in 1992.

“We work in the Catholic tradition, which is itself composed of great moral truths from both the Judaean-Christian tradition and Greek philosophy,” said Centre director Dr Bernadette Tobin.

“Reflection on the centuries-old Christian tradition of healing the sick, and on its extension into contemporary medicine, provides the focus for much of our work.

“The goal of healing encompasses a wide range of objectives: promoting health and preventing disease, deepening our understanding of the causes of illness and developing new forms of treatment, saving lives, slowing the progress of disease, relieving suffering, caring for people when they are sick, disabled, frail or elderly, and caring for the dying. Each of these objectives requires careful reconsideration if it is to be met in the circumstances in which health care is provided today.”

The Centre is named after John Hubert Plunkett (1802–1869), the first Catholic Solicitor-General and Attorney-General of the colony of NSW, and a great benefactor of the first Sisters of Charity in Australia.

The Centre takes an ethics consultation service to health care professionals who wish to talk over a case that they find professionally challenging. Hospitals and other health and nursing institutions are also assisted to work out ethically sound general standards and practices, for instance in dealing with very sick people who are not able to make their own medical and care decisions.

Centre staff members teach and supervise medical students, nursing students and postgraduates, as well as carrying out their own research. For example, School of Philosophy senior lecturer Dr Stephen Buckle is currently working on the contemporary relevance of the philosophy of David Hume, Dr Helen McCabe on the notion of “medical harm”, and Dr Tobin on the ethical implications of genetic technology.

The Centre takes a virtues-based approach to the ethics of health care, considering qualities of both the mind and heart of the carer.

“If a doctor, a nurse, a social worker or a hospital administrator is to be truly ‘a healer of the sick’, he or she will have those qualities of mind, or ‘virtues’ which include knowledge, understanding, deliberative ability, judgment, technical skill and wisdom. He or she will also have the virtues of compassion, good will, fairness, courage, loyalty, tolerance and trustworthiness.”