Health Matters: Medicine's Growing Spirituality

Chaplains are playing a larger role in helping hospital staffs and patients

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In a health crisis, patients and families may turn to a member of the hospital staff who offers help beyond the physical aspects of medical treatment: the chaplain.

With growing recognition of the role of spirituality in health care, hospital chaplains are being called on to help patients cope with fear and pain, make difficult end-of-life decisions and guide families through bereavement after a loss. They may help sick or dying patients reconnect with estranged family members. New guidelines call for chaplains to be included on teams of doctors and nurses who provide palliative care—which specializes in relieving the pain, symptoms and stress of serious illness. And chaplains often step in to help clinicians deal with their own feelings of stress and burnout.

Nearly 70% of community hospitals surveyed in 2011 provided chaplaincy services, up from 62% in 2003, according to the American Hospital Association.

The New York-based HealthCare Chaplaincy provides chaplaincy services in the city's health facilities, offers educational programs for professional chaplains, and conducts research in the field. Because so many patients and caregivers are dealing with chronic illness outside the hospital setting, the nonprofit organization is planning to launch a new website, ChaplainsOnHand, which will include a Chat With a Chaplain feature to allow users to communicate by email or phone with a professional chaplain.
"Now seems to be the time for spirituality to come along in health care, as everyone recognizes we are all body, mind and spirit," says the Rev. Eric Hall, a Presbyterian minister and the group's chief executive officer. "At times of difficulty, the chaplain is an incredible resource to engage and guide and direct."

Chaplains are typically board-certified by one of several professional associations following at least 1,600 hours of education. While they may come from different religious affiliations, they are able to minister to all faiths—or to those who don't have a specific religion but feel the need for spiritual guidance or discussion, Mr. Hall says.

A Pew Research poll last year found that the number of Americans who don't identify with any religion increased to nearly 20% of all adults from 15% five years earlier. Yet Pew also found that many of the country's 46 million unaffiliated adults are religious or spiritual in some way, with two-thirds saying they believe in God and more than a third classifying themselves as spiritual but not religious.

Wendy Cadge, a sociology professor at Brandeis University and author of the 2012 book "Paging God: Religion in the Halls of Medicine," says she has seen nurses in intensive-care units pray for patients, or respiratory therapists say a prayer when they must remove a breathing tube, in the presence of family. But chaplains "define healing in a much broader, more holistic way than other members of the health-care team," her research found, and they almost universally they believe they can best facilitate healing by helping patients tap their inner resources, rather than by calling on a higher power to intervene in their outcome.

Until recently there has been little data on what U.S. medical schools teach with regard to spirituality. A 2010 survey by researchers at Duke University Medical Center found that 90% of medical schools have courses or content on spirituality and health. Ms. Cadge says such courses, along with an increase in academic research, have helped raise awareness among doctors about spirituality's importance to health.

At Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, Sister Kathleen Gallivan directs a chaplaincy-services department with about a dozen chaplains available in the hospital 24/7. Often, they are called in the middle of the night when a crisis occurs, such as a new trauma victim coming in through the emergency room or the death of an infant. Her team will call in outside clergy from a specific faith if requested, but provides rituals and prayers for every religious tradition. They have blessed stem cells before transplant and held bedside wedding ceremonies for dying patients.
Sister Gallivan, a Roman Catholic nun who has a master of divinity degree and a Ph.D in pastoral psychology, says chaplains are a crucial part of the movement known as patient- and family-centered care. "Everyone else has a task in health care, and our job is to listen," she says. "A lot of what we provide is emotional support, even if we do nothing but sit with someone for presence and companionship."

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