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Answering the Call

Hospital chaplains facilitate faith

The Rev. Ronna Case recalls two situations she encountered as a chaplain at St. James Hospital and Medical Center. She was called to the emergency room to help an elderly African-American woman whose sister has just died.

"She was all alone; the rest of her family wasn't reachable behind the wall of voice mail and messaging we all have," Case explains. "I stood in as both a daughter and pastor; crossing ethnic lines to sit with her, help with phone calls, and to pray with her. It's part of listening for signs of what will help people with their grieving process."

But Case's position at St. James' Chicago Heights and Olympia Fields campuses also offers happy resolutions. "I remember a Spanish-speaking woman who had lost her baby and went through a grief process with me. The next year, she was back with her second baby, who was born successfully. That's one of the things that makes it all worthwhile."

Today's hospital chaplain is an oasis in the hospital's high-tech environment. Chaplains use their faith to serve peoples' spiritual and emotional needs whether they're being treated for simple or life-threatening illnesses.

Chaplains help people discuss their feelings, explains the Rev. Dean Hokel, Director of Pastoral Services at Northwest Community Hospital in Arlington Heights. "We help them utilize their own faith systems to deal with problems. We'll pray with people if appropriate, but without pushing our personal faith on them."

John Prater, Chief Chaplain for Chicago's three area Veterans Administration hospitals, says that "being chaplain" comes only after maintaining professionalism and clinical focus: "Chaplains must remove themselves from the equation by not referring to their own experiences, but those of the person served."

The chaplain's main duties involve meeting patients. The patient simply may need to become oriented to the hospital, talk about their situation, or receive spiritual counseling. Chaplains lead religious services in the hospital and perform individual religious rites according to their ordination. They also help secure a patient's specific religious needs, like a kosher meal, or call on faith leaders in the community if the pastoral staff can't accommodate a patient's personal faith. Other obligations include helping to formulate "advance directives" such as living wills, "do not resuscitate" orders, or assigning durable power of attorney.

With the growth of community hospitals and non-sectarian medical schools in the last century, the office of chaplain was created to serve people from an interfaith basis. Today, many faith-based hospitals are seeking representatives from denominations outside of their traditional foundations. Zaiga Robins, a Lutheran lay minister, is the first woman chaplain at Weiss Memorial Hospital in Chicago, and its first non-Jewish chaplain. "Our neighborhood has over 40 languages spoken," she explains. "People will come in from a faith tradition that I feel I am familiar with,

but the way they experience their faith can be totally different than what I know."

Most hospitals require chaplains to have a master's degree level in religious studies and ordination or endorsement from a recognized denomination. Other qualifications include certification by the Association of Professional Chaplains and credits in programs offered by the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education.

Staffing levels vary from hospital to hospital. Hokel oversees a staff of 27 full- and part-time chaplains at Northwest, for 24-hour availability. Robins is Weiss' only full-time chaplain, so she works to empower the medical staff to help with patients' personal needs when possible.

A chaplain can face personal crises every day. Jim Manzarido, a lay chaplain at Children's Memorial Hospital, works with children in oncology, or who are HIV-positive, or scheduled for neurosurgery. "When any parent learns that their child has cancer, 99.9 percent of the time their first thought is 'My child could die.' Most of my work is to simply help parents cope with the fact that a child is ill."

While some might see the chaplain's duties as depressing, Case says, "Seeing how they deal with illnesses or the end of life, is food for the mind."

Prater concurs: "The real reward is the satisfaction of helping people connect spiritually with themselves, with others, and then their God or higher power."

"I'm dealing with many older veterans, and what fascinates me is helping them come to a 'good death.' I had one veteran who grabbed my arm, looked at me with a smile and said 'I'll be dancing with you in heaven.' That just makes your day."

— Mark McDermott



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