

## Dealing with Death

*how we can all learn from the UK hospice movement*

by Michele Hart



As acknowledged leaders in palliative care, the UK hospice movement works closely with the wider caring community to share best practice and promote a holistic approach to end of life care. Help the Hospices is the charity which represents the UK hospice movement on a national level. Thanks to £70,000 of funding support from Healthplan provider HSA, part of Simplyhealthy Group, it has recently been able to provide grants to selected hospices across the UK to enable them to develop outreach training courses within their own regions.

One such course was that developed by the **Heart of Kent Hospice** aimed at helping clergy and church workers to support both those affected by life-threatening illnesses and themselves. Alison Bellamy who helped develop the course explains: "Perhaps surprisingly, very few faith leaders receive any kind of formal training in death and dying yet we expect them to deal with such issues on a weekly basis. One priest told me he was left emotionally drained after conducting four funerals one week, one of which was for a young child, another for a suicide. He was at a loss as to where to turn for support." The course addresses leaders' own need for support as well as looking at spirituality in the wider context and at emotions around and reactions to bereavement with a strong emphasis on communication. "Patients tell us that, while well meaning, religious leaders sometimes say the wrong thing or their approach is not always helpful," explains Alison. "We help them consider and address this."

Elsewhere, individual hospices and hospice chaplains work with their local faith and caring communities both on an informal basis and through specific courses, some in conjunction with British universities. These include a course accredited by the University of Kent and developed by **Pilgrims Hospice**. A module on the Kent Institute of Medicine and Health Sciences' MSc in Supportive and Palliative Care this week-long course is also open to all health care professionals looking to seek a greater understanding of the spiritual side of palliative care.

Meanwhile, at the University of Cumbria, Anton Muller, Vice President of the Association of Hospice and Palliative Care Chaplains (AHPCC), is designing a Certificate in Death and Dying aimed at anyone working in a caring capacity. Anton caused something of a stir when he joined **Eden Valley Hospice** two years ago, renaming the chapel the 'Quiet Place', discarding his dog collar and referring to himself as spiritual co-ordinator rather than hospice chaplain. Anton feels that spirituality is about more than religion and is fundamental to the hospice movement's holistic ethos. "Some people are denied the spiritual support they need at end of life because they feel alienated by a religious approach to spirituality."

His views are echoed by Karen Murphy, Secretary of the AHPCC. "The hospice movement is there to ensure that every person's individual needs are met at the end of life irrespective of religious views. Indeed too many people confuse religion with spirituality." Karen also supports Alison Bellamy's findings that show that many religious and spiritual leaders are uncomfortable around death and dying. "You would be surprised by how many chaplains tell me they never know quite what to say to someone or to their bereaved relatives," she says.

Karen explains how the hospice movement strives to break down barriers and build people's confidence in supporting those at the end of life, including those from the religious community who we assume to be 'experts' themselves. "I believe the most important thing is that we all address our own spirituality," says Karen. "By being self-aware we are in a much better position to support others." She believes we should all explore our own spirituality on a regular basis, asking ourselves questions such as: What do I believe in? What gives my life meaning? What do I hope for? Who do I love and who loves me? What would I change about my relationships?

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