

Editorial

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Spirituality and healthcare practice

This edition arrives in the wake of July 2005's London bombings. Certain puzzles are timeless: why we suffer, what it means, what we should do about it. Most of us will tangle with them in time – for few are spared suffering – and in every culture there are priests and healers who claim to have answers. These are crucial spiritual issues, but remain central questions for medicine too. And, though the paths of priests and healers diverged centuries ago, the modern worldview provides all kinds of answers – incomplete and confusing though they may be – to some of the questions. Take the neurophysiology of pain, the psychology of attachment and loss, programmes for self-help and personal development as typical examples. As for the why we are here, the ultra-reductionists find solace in selfish genes and the blind watch-maker of eons-long chance. So in a culture where science has killed off the gods, the questions of what we are and what we might become appear not to be matters of science; or are they?

Lately certain facts of spiritual life have become grist for science's mill: that humans have evolved the capacity to love and that they need love; that we have an interior world of consciousness which can appear to work independently of time and space; that attitudes and states of mind may kill or cure us; that healing relationships happen and that miraculous remissions do indeed occur. The scientific details are not yet available, but given the booming research efforts it may not be long before they are. So in anticipation that the spiritual paths and medical paths may be converging as we move towards a post-materialist worldview, this issue takes evidence from practitioners – nurses, doctors, social workers, priests, researchers who already weave this worldview into their practice.

Professor Steven Wright, formerly a thought leader in nursing practice and now an inter-faith minister, considers the importance of spirituality to wellbeing; the evidence that we are at a turning point in our culture, and how spirituality is increasingly seen as being at the heart of the healing process. Dr Chris Johns, a leading Macmillan clinical specialist and teacher, reflects on how being open to the everyday 'here and now' of clinical practice can make effective responses possible even when – as in palliative care – no easy answers are to be found. Reverend Alan Brown, a hospital chaplain, takes a look at how his field relates to health and its potential contribution to the holistic healthcare team. The Janki Foundation's highly successful learning pack explores spirituality in healthcare. Here members of the team that developed it describe using a personal and team development approach to identifying practitioners' core values, its sources of inspiration and underlying principals. Professor John Swinton explores the meaning of illness and how a sense of spirituality can enable a deeper understanding of how people live their health and illness.

Consciousness and connectedness, caring and healing, values and intentions, meaning and lived experience: all examples of practical spirituality in healthcare. Because a fuller understanding of what used to be called 'human nature' is a matter of great consequence – not least economically and politically. It would change the way we think about our humanity, our relationship to the natural world, the tasks of healthcare, the nature of wellbeing and health creation, and how we should conduct ourselves as practitioners and humans.