

## ***Special Section: Report from a Conference on the State of the Science of Spirituality and Palliative Care Research***

# State of the Science of Spirituality and Palliative Care Research: Research Landscape and Future Directions



Karen E. Steinhauser, PhD, and Tracy A. Balboni, MD, MPH

*Department of Population Health Sciences (K.E.S.), Division of General Internal Medicine (K.E.S.), Department of Medicine (K.E.S.), Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development (K.E.S.), Duke University School of Medicine, Durham, North Carolina; Center of Innovation in Health Services Research (K.E.S.), Durham Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Durham, North Carolina; Department of Psychosocial Oncology and Palliative Care and Department of Radiation Oncology (T.A.B.), Dana Farber Cancer Institute, Boston, Massachusetts; and Harvard Medical School (T.A.B.), Boston, Massachusetts*

### ***Introduction***

Research conducted over the past few decades has made significant strides toward illuminating the role of spirituality for patients and families living with serious illness. This evidence base demonstrates that spirituality frequently plays a central and complex role in patients' and families' experiences of incurable illness, including influencing quality of life, and medical decision-making. Advances in this field of research that expand the understanding of the relationships between spirituality and health outcomes and lead to the rigorous development of interventions to address patient and family spiritual needs hold tremendous potential for improving a comprehensive approach to care in serious illness.

However, research in the field of spirituality and palliative care is at a critical juncture. Although the evidence base has grown, the field lacks consistency in definition and methodological approaches, as well as an overarching framework for future research priorities. This lack of consistency and direction impedes a common framework for discourse regarding fundamental questions such as: 1) What is spirituality? 2) What are the key measurement and methodological issues? 3) What is the evidence regarding the relationship of spirituality and key outcomes? 4) How do we best screen for and assess spiritual needs? 5) What interventions have been most successful? And finally, 6) how do we effectively educate healthcare providers to address spirituality in palliative care?

With the goal of addressing these questions and identifying research priorities, the National Palliative

Care Research Center sponsored a two-day conference involving international research leaders in spirituality and palliative care. The goals of the State of the Science Conference in Spirituality and Palliative Care were to examine the current evidence base related to the aforementioned questions. Each author reviewed a key topic area, identified gaps, and proposed recommendations for future research, which were presented to the authorship team who provided further feedback. The results are divided into two papers: Part I addresses key conceptual and methodological considerations and the current landscape of outcomes research in palliative care. Part II addresses current research guiding spiritual care provision to patients and families within palliative care. Both papers follow a similar structure, including an overview of the current state of the science and key research priorities. A table of recommendations is provided at the end of both Parts I and II.

These research priorities are identified as critical next steps to further our understanding of the role of spirituality in the experience of serious illness. They are underscored by clear extant evidence of the potential for spirituality research to transform palliative care provision and outcomes for patients and families. Hence, these priorities may galvanize and guide funding priorities that advance comprehensive care of patients with serious illness and their caregivers. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of including those with expertise to relevant expertise in review efforts to fund research in spirituality and palliative care. Such research will aid in the integration of

---

Address correspondence to: Karen E. Steinhauser, PhD, 411 W. Chapel Hill Street, Suite 500, Durham, NC 27701, USA. E-mail: [Karen.steinhauser@duke.edu](mailto:Karen.steinhauser@duke.edu)

---

Accepted for publication: February 20, 2017.

spirituality into palliative care practice, ensuring evidence-based approaches to advancing whole-person care.

### ***Disclosures and Acknowledgments***

This project was supported in full by a grant from the National Palliative Care Research Center (NPCRC). The authors are grateful for project support from the NPCRC. In addition, Dr. Balboni

received support from the Templeton Foundation. Dr. Steinhauer was supported by the Center of Innovation for Health Services Research in Primary Care (CIN 13-410), at the Durham VA Medical Center, VA Mental Health and Chaplaincy Program (XVA 21-150 VA-DOD Integrated Mental Health Strategy Action #23), and the Greenwall Foundation. The views herein are those of the authors and do not reflect the views of the funding organizations.