

Hospitalized Children and Their Families Need Spiritual Care

Editor's Note: This article first appeared in Huffington Post

The father of a very ill hospitalized child told me recently that it would not have occurred to him to ask to see a chaplain, yet having a chaplain with his family during care conferences and meeting with their family during times of stress was a source of great strength. He said that meeting with a chaplain helped their whole family articulate their core values, hopes, concerns, and fears, and helped them to make the best decisions possible throughout their daughter's medical treatment.

More than three million children are hospitalized each year in the United States. Whether it is a short stay for a specialized test or treatment of a chronic condition, hospitalization can have a major impact on the child and family. As the father of a young son, I am very sensitive to the unique skills required in understanding children's emotional and spiritual development, reaction to illness and injury, and a child's experience of the health care setting and treatment. Children require extra time, from monitoring specialized medications to focusing care on their unique needs and involving parents from start to finish. We need to know that the medical professionals treating our child are not only competent, but compassionate and empathetic with kids of all ages.

In the past hospital chaplains were traditionally called when a patient's death was imminent and families needed help with making final arrangements, and this mindset is why we often don't think to ask for them. Many people don't understand the difference between a professional health care chaplain, and a minister, priest, rabbi, or imam. While professional health care chaplains may come from any one of many religious disciplines or none at all, they are cultural liaisons, trained to listen to people of any faith or no faith in their time of crisis, and also to hear what is *unsaid*, such

as fear when their child is facing serious or risky surgery. Parents may not want to express that fear in front of a child, but they are understandably anxious about what the treatment and care should be. Families may feel isolated, particularly in large hospitals, so it is important to have a way to connect personally in a hectic environment focused on efficiency, technology, and quite often overwork. The professional health care chaplain, by sitting with the family to help relieve their spiritual distress, can elevate the sense of humanity often lost in health care encounters.

Today professionally trained certified chaplains are often part of the hospital interdisciplinary team—or IDT—that includes physicians, nurses, perhaps a physical therapist to schedule post-op therapy and a social worker to help in coordinating care. Each team member who visits the patient records his or her findings on the patient's medical chart to communicate information to others so that all on the team can follow the patient's progress. These chaplains are able to interpret what they are hearing from you or your family to the others on the team.

Spirituality means something different for almost everyone. The chaplain's goal is to figure out and to listen carefully enough to truly hear what it is that brings hope, comfort, and peace to patients and their families.

The father I mentioned at the beginning of this story was able to take his fully recovered daughter home after two weeks and, as it turned out, on Father's Day, something he considered a very special gift. He was so grateful for the care his daughter received that he has since met with that hospital's spiritual care director alongside medical residents as they are oriented to pastoral services at the hospital. This proved invaluable to the medical residents, who told this father that his story helped them to appreciate how and when to refer to chaplains for care for families and they now have a deeper appreciation of the impact spiritual well-being has for children and families.



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