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Training hospital chaplains

CPE PROGRAM: Providence Alaska Medical Center prepares those we rely on in a crisis.

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Anchorage Daily News
Staff

In the world of health care, chaplains play an important role in maintaining the human side of a hospital. A program at Providence Alaska Medical Center, the only one of its kind in the state, delivers the training chaplains need to balance medicine, the spirit and the tough questions that follow when the two meet. The Clinical Pastoral Education program is a satellite affiliate of the Stanford University Hospital program in Stanford, Calif. It brings theological students and ministers of all faiths into supervised encounters with people in crisis. Through classroom discussions and hours spent with patients, staff members and families, participants gain a new understanding of both ministry and chaplaincy.

"They assess the needs of patients and provide company, as people sometimes feel isolated and vulnerable in hospitals," said the Rev. Frank Macht, manager of Spiritual Care at Providence and supervisor of its CPE program. "Sometimes chaplains provide the ministry of presence, and sometimes they walk with patients at the crossroads of their lives and help them answer spiritual questions like 'Why me?' and 'Why now?' " Chaplains do everything from sitting with patients, to maintaining communication between family members and doctors during surgery, to contacting a patient's clergy member after hospitalization.

CPE intern Diane Johnson is ordained as a priest in Jodo Shinshu, or Shin Buddhism. Although her religious background differs from that of most of her patients and their families, it's rarely an issue.

"A chaplain is trained to talk to anybody of any faith, not to become the patient's minister," Johnson said. "My own religion doesn't need to enter the conversation. I'm there as a friend; I'm there for the patient."

Johnson also works for Denali Home Health and Hospice as a volunteer and bereavement coordinator and chaplain. She's seen a few differences between the hospice environment and the hospital.

"Having worked in hospice, I'm usually in somebody's home and many factors are known," she said. "There's not so much panic as in the hospital setting. But the bottom line is why I'm really there. A chaplain's biggest gift is to be present and just listen."

The four other interns in the CPE class are a pastor from a Korean Presbyterian congregation, a Russian Orthodox deacon, a newly ordained Catholic priest and a spiritual care coordinator from Central Peninsula General Hospital in Soldotna. Macht believes the differences among them strengthen the training, which includes reviewing their bedside visits, almost verbatim, with each other and himself.

"The core of clinical pastoral education is to put a diverse group together," Macht said. "It's an action/reflection method of learning and uses a very relational approach - it's person to person, face to face."

Students must complete four units in the CPE program to take the exam to be a board-certified medical or military chaplain. The program also prepares ministers and lay people for roles in churches and social service organizations.

In a day and age where the words "holy war" are often used, Johnson sometimes wonders whether people can find common ground and compassion in daily life, let alone during a medical emergency. She's finding the answers through the CPE experience.

"It helps break down those self-created barriers that create tension and struggle," she said. "The Buddhist tradition stresses questioning and looking within. CPE questions motives and intentions on a regular basis when we meet with our peers and our supervisor. Even though we're getting poked and prodded mentally, which can be uncomfortable sometimes, I feel right in my element as a Buddhist."

For more information about the Clinical Pastoral Education program, visit www.acpe.edu.

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Illustration:

Photo 1: DianeJohnson_021906.jpg

MARC LESTER / Anchorage Daily News

"A chaplain's biggest gift is to be present and just listen," said Diane Johnson, an ordained Buddhist priest studying in a pastoral program through Providence Alaska

Medical Center.

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