

In 2008, Saint Elizabeth Health Care is celebrating 100 years of service to the community. What follows emerges from a conversation with Susan Morgan, one of the community chaplains with the organization.

Roots in the Catholic Community

Saint Elizabeth Health Care has been an active participant in the development of community health since its founding in 1908. With an original staff of only four nurses, it began operations as a not-for-profit charitable organization a century ago, at the request of Toronto Archbishop F.P. McEvay. In the early years, nurses provided mostly prenatal and paediatric care, making their way to the homes of their clients on foot or by streetcar. Within two decades, Saint Elizabeth nurses were making more than 10,000 visits per year. As health care needs became more complex, the demand for quality care in the community increased. Through its comprehensive programs and services, Saint Elizabeth Health Care has found creative and innovative ways to respond to those needs in its ongoing dedication to serve the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of clients and families in their homes and communities.

In 1999, the Office of Lay Ministry and Chaplaincy of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto partnered with Saint Elizabeth Health Care to create the new position of multi-faith Chaplaincy. This innovative ministry is also in keeping with the values espoused by the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, which makes clear that persons “have a fundamental right to considerate care that safeguards their personal dignity and respects their cultural, psychosocial, and spiritual values” (JCAHO, 1998).

Currently, Saint Elizabeth Health Care offers a chaplaincy program in two areas - Jan Podolak serves the Peel Region, and Susan Morgan, the York Region of the Archdiocese.

Spiritual Care at Saint Elizabeth Health Care

Spirituality refers to that part of each of us that seeks to find meaning and purpose in our lives. Spiritual care enables people to express, affirm and at times discover their beliefs and deepest values, keeping the feelings of hope and purpose strong in their lives.

Spiritual care is an integral part of the mission of Saint Elizabeth Health Care. We recognize that health care involves the whole person – mind, body and spirit. In times of illness, trauma and loss, and certainly in the face of death, people require more than physical or medical care to help them cope. Working in collaboration with other members of the health care team, the chaplain can assist during these transition times to

assess and respond to the spiritual needs of clients, their family members, and also health care staff.

Spiritual care contributes to a healthy organizational culture. Chaplains are integral members of the health care team, providing care and support for staff who experience the stress of client care. Chaplains not only help staff members cope, but also empower them to recognize the meaning and value of their work in new ways.

Some of the services and supports provided by the chaplain include:

- providing one-to-one visitation support with clients and, when necessary, their family members
- exploring the meaning of illness, suffering and life transitions
- facilitating connection to faith communities
- attending to concerns related to grief and loss
- providing opportunities for prayer, meditation and reflection on scripture
- offering support surrounding moral and ethical decisions
- exploring beliefs and attitudes regarding death and dying
- ensuring reception of the Sacraments of Anointing of the Sick and Holy Communion
- assisting in the planning and delivery of funerals and memorial services
- communicating with caregivers
- providing staff support relative to personal crises or work-related stress

Questions one may wish to explore with the chaplain include:

- How do I nurture a sense of hope?
- Is there meaning in my current situation? Does my life have a sense of purpose?
- Are there areas of my life where I am seeking peace and reconciliation?
- How can I continue to nurture my spiritual identity?
- What is sacred in my life?
- How does the nurturing of my spirit affect the care of my body?

Spiritual Care for the Dying

The human person is an integrated being of body, mind, heart and spirit. All aspects of our human being are affected by a threat to health and life. Spiritual needs – even if they have been repressed or unaddressed for years – rise to the surface at

a time of crisis. Unmet needs may cause spiritual suffering. Illness and the fear of pain and of dying may undermine a sense of spiritual wellbeing, wholeness and meaning. As well as suffering physically, dying persons may experience depression, inner turmoil, anxiety and isolation. Their sense of being marginalized may be heightened by an inability or hesitancy to share their spiritual suffering with family members and friends.

Those who feel strengthened and upheld by their faith traditions continue to benefit greatly from ongoing contact with their faith communities. Spiritual care therefore is considered to be an integral part of palliative care.

Ministry of Presence

Through a ministry of presence, the chaplain listens without judgement and brings human warmth and compassion. The chaplain allows and encourages the expression of a whole range of feelings in a context of respectfulness and safety. Regardless of what is expressed, clients are given the assurance that they will not be abandoned. Sick or dying individuals are accompanied on their journey through regular visits and supported as they open to what may have been closed, neglected or forgotten. With encouragement and support, a client may experience wholeness and integration amidst the disintegration and fragmentation caused by illness and disease.

Nothing is more important than the quality of attentive listening. The client becomes the teacher for the chaplain, whose role is not to fix or problem-solve but to offer encouragement and meaningful support at a time of crisis. In sickness and in the dying process, a person may feel a loss of worth and question not only the meaning of life but also the meaningfulness of his or her own life. Dying persons may fear that they will soon be forgotten and that they don't count for much anymore. Their sense of loss and grief may be overwhelming at times. With the realization that they are no longer able to participate in the life around them, feelings of isolation and loneliness may arise. The attentive and respectful presence of the chaplain upholds dignity and gives assurance to both client and family members that they are cherished and honoured.

Through the exercise of kindness and compassion, the chaplain is a concrete sign of God's love and the faithfulness of the Church. Clients and their families are helped to recognize and enhance their own spiritual strengths during life's most challenging period.

The Value of Religious and Spiritual Care at the End of Life

In order that the dignity of dying persons is upheld, it is necessary to consider what makes it possible for a person to arrive at a peaceful reconciliation with self and others, to reflect on experiences that have given direction to his or her life and to place oneself in the presence of God.

Spiritual companionship provides concrete assurance that one does not walk alone. The chaplain's role is to engender hope

and to communicate compassion and a sense of connection and belonging to the human community. For all the days of life, the chaplain supports the dying person's quest for meaning, purposefulness and wholeness.

One of the most difficult moments for clients and their families occurs when they are told that there are no more treatment options. A person may be sent home to die or to await the time when it may again become necessary to return to the hospital or to a hospice setting for palliative care. The return to a hospital setting is often anticipated with great anxiety and fear by clients and with a sense of remorse or guilt by their families.

Saint Elizabeth Health Care assures the provision of services to enable palliative care in the home. Should a return to a hospital or hospice setting become necessary, the chaplain ensures a continuity of spiritual care, continuing to visit regardless of the setting. At a most vulnerable moment, a sense of connection and the assurance that they will not be neglected or forgotten is given.

The chaplain's visits tend to make hospitalization easier because they provide comfort and help the client to relax. Moreover, clients have indicated that one of the most important chaplaincy functions is helping their family members with feelings associated with illness and hospitalization. Thus, a chaplain's care for family members has a positive impact for all concerned. Families rely on religious and spiritual resources to cope with distress during a loved one's illness and the chaplain tries to be attentive to addressing these needs and encouraging connection to the respective faith community.

Studies have demonstrated that religious faith and practice impact emotional and physical well-being. The chaplain plays an integral role in supporting and strengthening these religious and spiritual aspirations. The community chaplains supported by Saint Elizabeth Health Care and the Archdiocese of Toronto have both the opportunity and a sacred responsibility to provide holistic care in the Catholic tradition and to help dying persons become aware of how beloved they are.

*CCBI congratulates
St. Elizabeth Health Care
on their 100th Anniversary!*

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