***Christians on Ageing* Conference Call**

**Preparing professionals to help people with issues of spirituality and belief as they are approaching the end of life.**

**Discussion led by Professor Karen Groves on 20 June 2023**

**We were**: Karen Groves, Amanda Gafford, Katharyn Mumby, David Wells, Gerry Burke, Peter Coleman, Bill Hawes, Monica Lawrence, Joyce Odell, Barbara Stephens and David Jolley

We began with brief introductions so that everyone had an understanding of who we are and where we come from. **Karen explained** that she began her medical career as a GP but then became involved with Palliative Care. She is was recently Medical Director of Queenscourt Hospice in Southport: [Queenscourt Hospice | Where life is for living](https://www.queenscourt.org.uk/" \t "_blank). She is Honorary Clinical Professor at Edge Hill University: [Edge Hill Partnership - Queenscourt Hospice](https://www.queenscourt.org.uk/about-us/edge-hill-partnership/)

**She referred to the NICE Guidance of 2004** which, for the first time, stressed the need for health care professionals to be aware of the spiritual needs of patients, and to be competent in responding to those needs. [Improving supportive and palliative care for adults with cancer | Guidance | NICE](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/csg4)

* **Following network audits of current practice, this led to the design of training courses** for nurses and other healthcare professionals to help them identify spiritual needs and to respond appropriately to them.
* The context discovered was that **many young healthcare professionals had scant acquaintance with the concept of spirituality** – equating it with ‘religion’, and having no identification of either within their own lives, nor even a vocabulary to address and discuss such matters.
* **The demise of religious practice in the UK** is exemplified by statistics on baptisms within the Church of England: 67% of all  English babies were Christened in 1951. Only 10% in 2016.
* **Dealing with such issues** within The NHS has been complicated by progressive ‘Political Correctness’, the recognition of Protected Characteristics [Protected characteristics | Equality and Human Rights Commission (equalityhumanrights.com)](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/equality-act/protected-characteristics), and ‘scare stories’ in the media of consequences for professionals if they discuss spiritual or religious beliefs with patients or families and cause offence.

Countering these discouraging and confusing phenomena, **NICE’s approach has been affirmed and amplified** by a series of publications, the most recent being The Lancet’s Commission on the Value of Death: [Report of the Lancet Commission on the Value of Death: bringing death back into life](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(21)02314-X.pdf)

There have been statements of variable worth from:

* The GMC: [Treatment and care towards the end of life - ethical guidance - GMC (gmc-uk.org)](https://www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-guidance-for-doctors/treatment-and-care-towards-the-end-of-life/guidance)
* The NMC: [nursing-standards-briefing.pdf (nmc.org.uk)](https://www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sitedocuments/standards/nursing-standards-briefing.pdf)
* And the RCN: [spiritual care | RCNi](https://rcni.com/keywords/spiritual-care)

**What matters to you?**

Dame Cicely Saunders introduced us to the concept of Total Pain: [Embracing Cicely Saunders's concept of total pain - PMC (nih.gov)](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1200625/) with dimensions physical, psychological, social, and spiritual - i.e. holistic care

**What is spirituality? What is religion?**

There are many definitions of both, some keeping them apart, others allowing overlap of one sort or another. It is probably best, operationally, to allow whatever definition an individual feels is right for them.

* A key reference: Margaret Holloway 2011: [Microsoft Word - 2011-01-24 - FINAL - approved orig from Judith 24 jan.doc (publishing.service.gov.uk)](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/215798/dh_123804.pdf)

**Spiritual and existential distress** may be generated by fear of dying, loss of control, feeling a burden on others and isolation and hopelessness. Symptoms cross physical, social, psychological and spiritual realms. Smith & Jackson 2013

Approaches to dealing with it rely on the strengths and beliefs of the individual (self), and relationships with others, nature and a higher being (God), and seeking self-identity and inner peace.

Although somewhat dated now, **Chao, Chan and Yen: The essence of spirituality in terminally ill patients**, provides a careful study of findings [The essence of spirituality of terminally ill patients - PubMed (nih.gov)](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12522736/)

**We can help most** by listening and walking beside the individual – not leading, but being alongside

* St Benedict: ‘Listen with your heart’ [“Listen carefully…and incline the ear of your heart” — Rule of St. Benedict - Word on Fire](https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/listen-carefullyand-incline-the-ear-of-your-heart-rule-of-st-benedict/)

**We were introduced to the work which Karen has developed** and leads from Southport: [Spiritual Gates – Opening the Spiritual Gate](https://www.openingthespiritualgate.net/)

* [Keys to Opening the Spiritual Gate – Face to Face – Spiritual Gates](https://www.openingthespiritualgate.net/course/keys-to-opening-the-spiritual-gate-2/)
* [All Courses – Spiritual Gates (openingthespiritualgate.net)](https://www.openingthespiritualgate.net/all-courses/)

The courses help people to use open questions, silence, reflection, summary and inviting the person to make their own plan. Listening is the key component, with time and searching and reflecting.

Karen also directed us to the **Personal Spiritual Reminiscence Box**, produced by the Diocese of Wrexham 2015: [Reminiscence Box | Diocese of Wrexham (rcdwxm.org.uk)](https://www.rcdwxm.org.uk/reminiscence-box)

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**This was a wonderful presentation**– leaving us spellbound, but not silent:

* Awareness that generations have lost **the vocabulary for the transcendental**, is a reality and shocking.
* There were comments relating to the **special needs of people with communication difficulties**
* We heard a moving story of changes which occurred within a family consequent upon conversations generated during the time one member was dying of cancer, and the impact of prayers
* We were reminded of the importance of diversity of culture and beliefs in our modern societies. The Southport resources include references to work with people of differing faiths. [All Faiths – Spiritual Gates (openingthespiritualgate.net)](https://www.openingthespiritualgate.net/all-faiths/)
* We were reminded to be aware of the lack of uniformity amongst members of staff, for the wishes of the NHS for uniformity - and the need to avoid straying into evangelism within the professional setting.

**Review:** Participants commented that the presentation and the discussion were stunning, inspirational, helpful and challenging.

Our deepest thanks to Professor Groves and to everyone who shared in the experience

***David Jolley***

June 2023