Role of Chaplains in Providing Care to Palliative Care Patients with Advanced Cancer

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ABSTRACT

Attention to spiritual, religious and existential needs is essential to comprehensive care of patients facing life-threatening illnesses, such as advanced cancer. Healthcare chaplains are uniquely trained to assess and address these needs. However, the content, processes, and impact of spiritual care for adults with cancer have been minimally studied. In addition, the role of the chaplain remains somewhat opaque to many healthcare providers. Our team at UCSF Medical Center Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center completed an 18-month mixed-method project to further articulate and study one model of chaplaincy care, called Spiritual Assessment and Intervention Model. Spiritual AIM evolved over 20 years of clinical care and has been taught extensively in chaplaincy education. 31 patients participated in three audio-recorded, one-on-one sessions with a chaplain, as well as an exit interview with a research assistant. Our team analyzed the transcripts through qualitative methods (iterative development of a codebook). Patients also completed several measures asking them about their symptoms, quality of life and spiritual/religious well being, before and after the sessions with the chaplain. This project received generous funding from the John Templeton Foundation and the HealthCare Chaplaincy.

As the lead chaplain researcher for the project, I will discuss:

1) Study design and preliminary findings from the pilot quantitative data
2) The Spiritual AIM model -- as an example of one well-articulated model of chaplaincy
3) Qualitative findings and analysis from transcripts that capture the content of patient-chaplain sessions and patients’ descriptions (in their own words) of the chaplain’s role