



Manitoba hires spiritual care coordinator to promote nonmedical side of healing

Barbara Sibbald

In the midst of cutbacks and restructuring, Manitoba Health has taken the seemingly unusual step of hiring a spiritual care coordinator.

Rev. George Neufeld sees nothing unusual about it.

Neufeld, who moved into the newly created position last November, is developing standards and policies to guide spiritual care and pastoral services in the province's hospitals and other institutions.

He says the Manitoba Interfaith Council and the Ministry of Health were both worried that spiritual aspects of care would "fall through the cracks" because of recent restructuring initiatives. "The ministry decided that spiritual care is a major health determinant."

"The province and regional health authorities saw a growing need to coordinate spiritual care within our health care services," stated Darren Praznik, then health minister. "[We] want to integrate spiritual care within new and developing programs and coordinate it with existing programs to ensure individuals and their families have access to spiritual care options."

Neufeld says this holistic approach to health is "very progressive" and credits it to a philosophical shift the Manitoba ministry made 4 years ago, when it moved from an illness to a wellness model. "They saw the need to move beyond medical interventions."

Neufeld says spiritual care is cost-effective, quoting a study which stated that spiritual assistance leads to a shorter length of stay and faster healing.

Neufeld, a Manitoba Health employee based in Winnipeg, works with the interfaith council and the province's 13 regional health authorities to focus and standardize spiritual care. The interfaith council, which comprises the heads of all Manitoba faiths, including aboriginal spiritual leaders, is responsible for pastoral care in health and correctional institutions. It has been asking for a provincial spiritual care coordinator since a survey revealed the need. "Our goal is to ensure that the right to worship is respected and that people's spiritual and other needs are looked after," says the 64-year-old Neufeld.

There are about 60 pastoral care health workers, such as chaplains, in Manitoba.

Neufeld is Canada's third provincial coordinator of spiritual care; Ontario created the position in the late 1960s and Newfoundland hired its first coordinator about 3 years ago.

Neufeld has worked in pastoral health care for almost his entire career. Ordained as a Mennonite minister in 1960, he has served as Roman Catholic chaplain at Winnipeg's Misericordia Health Centre since 1981. In addition to his 1975 certification as a hospital chaplain by the Canadian Association of Pastoral Practice and Education, Neufeld acquired a master's degree in marriage and family therapy in 1996.

Neufeld differentiates between curing — a medical process — and healing — a spiritual experience. "The source of healing is inside, within your spiritual energy," he explains. "The things that are blocking healing are also blocking curing."

As the province's spiritual care coordinator, Neufeld meets monthly with an advisory body that includes 1 representative from Manitoba Health, 2 from regional health authorities and 3 from the interfaith council.

He has set 3 broad goals.

- He wants to promote the presence of spiritual care for patients and others. In collaboration with community and institutional spiritual leaders, he will assess needs and then provide aspects of spiritual care, such as hiring new chaplains.
- He plans to develop a provincial program to train spiritual personnel, both chaplains and lay people. "I want to expand the existing program to include, for example, spiritual care volunteers."
- He wants to develop "clear-cut" standards for chaplaincy, with cross-cultural content included in the program. "We're starting to include elements to train natives," he explains. "We're experimenting with healing and sharing circles, and sweat lodges. . . . These are all new approaches to achieving our goal of producing good chaplains."



Rev. George Neufeld is Canada's third provincial spiritual care coordinator

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