The role of the chaplain

‘Holistic care’ is concerned with the whole person and includes not only a person’s physical health but also their social, emotional and spiritual health and well being.

Chaplains are pastoral practitioners who seek to build a relationship of trust through compassionate presence and thereby offer help and support to a wide range of people. Such support might (for example) focus on the emotional or spiritual adjustment to illness or on the search for meaning and purpose through difficult times. Help in crisis situations, including family/relational issues as well as bereavement care, are regular areas of chaplaincy involvement.

Chaplains work collectively and collaboratively alongside other health care professionals to provide psycho-social-spiritual services for patients and their families. Chaplains receive regular patient referrals from our staff and contribute to patients overall care through regular involvement and liaison with members of multi disciplinary teams.

The chaplain's specialty is to possess a particular understanding of the relation between faith, illness, and the emotional and mental conflicts that might arise. A chaplain seeks to motivate and initiate meaningful use of each individual's beliefs and attitudes in the management of their difficulties.

The chaplain's role is supportive, serving as a counsellor and guide to the psycho-spiritual needs of the staff and patients.

The chaplain's ministry to the patients is a prime responsibility but often, chaplains will also come into contact with the patient's family and be able to respond to their needs as required.

Involvement with hospital staff forms another major area of pastoral responsibility for the chaplaincy team. They are available for staff support and advice and are often involved in staff advocacy (eg disciplinary/competence proceedings).

Key areas of focus

Patients

- developing an integrated pastoral care ministry of support, guidance, nurture and encouragement
- providing information on faith traditions and access to resources and rituals
- assisting patients to cope with the psychological, social and spiritual aspects of their illnesses and difficulties arising from them
- helping identify spiritual and religious ‘filters’
- offering counselling services related to problems/issues that patients might share with a professional religious worker eg fear of death, guilt, and forgiveness
- acting as a facilitator between patients and hospital staff, or family and patient, or family and staff, as required
- serving as a religious resource person for the patient
- serving as a representative of the religious community to the institution
- inviting patients to express feelings and explore the meaning of their experience e.g. about an illness or other life stress
- working with family and friends for their own healing and support of their loved one
- exploring spiritual resources for rehabilitation, healing and growth

Staff

- working with staff to support clients
- providing pastoral care services to the staff of the hospital
- establishing a training function for those staff interested in personal development in the area of psycho-social-spiritual concerns
- facilitating groups of staff for team building and debriefing
- participating in case conferences regarding patients and/or problem areas
- helping other professionals identify and attend to their own needs and issues, by providing staff support and valuing their particular contribution
- serving as an intermediary or resource person in some of the complex situations of healthcare
- serving as a resource for those addressing the complex ethical issues involved in making healthcare decisions

Church and community relations

- assisting the local churches to develop programmes of chaplaincy support
- developing a group of lay people to assist the chaplaincy team provide holistic patient care
- enlisting and maintaining a volunteer's programme

Co-ordinating the hospital's religious activities

- supporting various religious staff groups
- co-ordinating outside use of religious resources in the hospital
- controlling the distribution of religious materials within the hospital
Pastoral services

- creating and maintain a pastoral care services department
- engaging in appropriate research to strengthen the pastoral services department
- maintaining appropriate professional relationships with the hospital administration

Ecumenical chaplaincy

For the vast majority of people who find themselves in hospital, the particular denomination of a chaplain is not important. What is needed is that the person is someone who provides relevant spiritual and pastoral care to the person in need at that time. It is this recognition that is important and is what unites Christian believers at the time of need, rather that the details of church personship that too often cloud the agenda and do not allow the real needs of the person at this time to be addressed and met. This is also often true of those of other faith traditions.