



Teaching about Spirituality in New Zealand Medical Schools

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Spirituality



- Shown to positively impact a range of health outcomes
 - improved quality of life
 - increased ability to cope
 - increased self-esteem
 - a greater sense of hope
 - a greater ability to find meaning

Spirituality

- Increasingly seen nationally and internationally in healthcare policy, guidelines and practice
- Critical to comprehensive and culturally competent healthcare.

Spirituality

- Increasingly taught in medical schools
- In more than 80% of US schools
- ~ 59% of UK schools



- Is it taught in New Zealand medical schools?

Spirituality

- Means different things to different people. It may include (a search for) one's ultimate beliefs and values; a sense of meaning and a purpose in life; a sense of connectedness; identity and awareness; and for some people, religion. It may be understood at an individual or population level.

Egan, R., MacLeod, R., Jaye, C., McGee, R., Baxter, J. & Herbison, P. 2011. What is spirituality? Evidence From a New Zealand Hospice Study. *Mortality*, 16, 307-324.

Interviews – 17 people involved in curriculum planning and delivery

- What does the term spirituality mean to you?
- Is teaching about spirituality an important part of medical training? If yes, why?
- Where in the medical curriculum is spirituality currently taught, and how?
- Where in the medical curriculum should spirituality be taught, and how?
- If teaching about spirituality is an important part of medical training, do you perceive any challenges to this being done in your medical school? If yes, please explain.



- **Many responses** to question about what spirituality means
- All thought it an **important** part of medical training
- Only 4 responded definitively to ‘where is it taught?’
- **No agreement** on how it should be taught
- Many advised **caution** about teaching it



Questionnaire

- 187 sent out – 73 responded (39%)
- 52% thought spirituality **was important**
- 71% thought doctors **should understand their own spirituality**
- 58% **didn't know** if spirituality was taught (18% in addition said it wasn't)

Discussion

- Lowish response rate but
- **Important** aspect of healthcare - variably understood (97% ‘...important.. to some people’)
- **Lack of consensus** about what it means
 - a major obstacle for teaching
- **‘Potential sensitivities’** in teaching
 - and yet students are quite open

see MacLeod, R., Parkin, C., Pullon, S. & Robertson, G. 2003. Early clinical exposure to people who are dying: learning to care at the end of life. *Medical Education*, 37, 51-8.

Summary



- Spirituality does not have a well defined place in New Zealand medical schools
- It is not clearly understood by those involved in curriculum development and delivery
- Many regard it as an important aspect that *should* be taught

Take home message

Spirituality is an important aspect of medical education which is not clearly understood or taught in New Zealand medical schools.

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