

# **Spirituality in a Secular Age**

## **Abstract**

This paper will discuss the ways in which General Practitioners in New Zealand understand and define spirituality. It will consider the ways in which spirituality is experienced both by the doctors and as reported from their patients.

It is based on research undertaken as part of a PhD on Spiritual Issues in General Practice in 2007- 8. Twenty two General Practitioners, eleven women and eleven men, had a semi structured interview lasting between 1-2 hours. These were then analysed using a generic qualitative method.

What is very clear in the results is that spirituality is an underlying human aspect which connects people with themselves, each other, the natural world, and the transcendent. It seeks answers to the questions : Who am I? Where am I going? Where have I come from? Attention to spirituality enables resilience and compassion at work.

**Key Words :** Spiritual awareness; spiritual experiences; health care; self care;

## **Introduction**

I am delighted to be here today. I realised that I forgot to include the important people in my life in my bio – my husband of 44 years, my three children and their partners and six grandchildren who I gather round me here.

**1** This paper will discuss the ways in which General Practitioners in New Zealand understand and define spirituality. It will consider the ways in which spirituality is experienced both by the doctors and as reported from their patients.

**2** From the statistics of the census New Zealand appears to be a very secular society. The census questions asked about religion not spirituality. 32%(28) claim no religion. A further 6% (6) objected

to the question and 7% (8) did not answer it.<sup>1</sup> Thus 45% of the population in 2006 seem to be secular.

The reasons for increasing secularity in the Western world are many. The philosopher, Charles Taylor identifies a process of disenchantment, loss of the sacred, of society beginning in the late middle ages. Prior to this the world was seen as ordered cosmos having spiritual and secular realms.

Disenchantment resulted in the loss of a sense of the sacred and the rise of the 'buffered self'. The buffered self believed that human endeavour alone is responsible for social order in the world. The combination of this and the rise of science at the time of the enlightenment made belief in religion and spirituality more difficult. {Taylor, 2007 #246} This was further advanced by Darwin in his theory of evolution, which was seen by many as a nail in the coffin of religion.

The ongoing struggle that the main religious traditions have had trying to respond to the rise of reductive scientific materialism and individualism has been about trying to maintain contact with the past and respond appropriately to new discoveries.

The current scientific world view is based on an understanding of the universe which is evolving and has both order and chaos coexisting. This is very different from the religious world view described in the book of Genesis. It is also very different from the modernist view, still espoused by some scientific fundamentalists, that proposes science and rationality alone will solve all existential and practical earthly problems. This view is increasingly difficult to defend in the current social and ecological state of the world. However, it also shaped and directed the biomedical model.

## **The biomedical model**

The dominance of the biomedical model in health care over the past 50 years has led to an ignoring of the spiritual aspect of human beings because it rests on evidence based medicine - a reductive scientific paradigm that is unable to perceive that which cannot be measured.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Statistics Census 2006. Figures in brackets 2001 census. The census question asks about religion not spirituality

3 Professor Ian Kerridge, at the Australasian Bioethics Conference last month, described it well.

EBM promised and initially provided a simple approach to complex medical problems, a way to mediate between competing data, interests or claims and a promise of objectivity, impartiality, consistency, rationality, truth and certainty.

But EBM could provide none of these things as evidence is not value-free, self-apparent, disinterested or atheoretical but is socially and culturally constructed, relational, gendered, embodied, intersubjective and communal. {Kerridge, 2009 #354}

He concludes :

What may be required is an ongoing assessment of evidence, comparison with the individual, attention to narrative, care and presence.

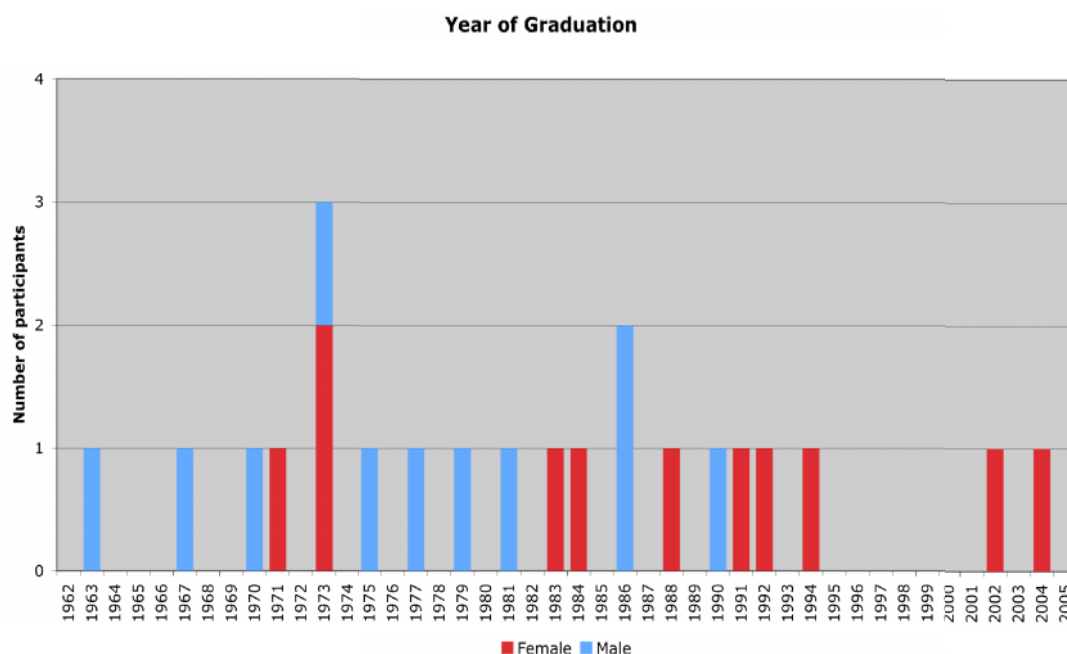
EBM works with populations but is therefore unable to describe the unique, the particular and that which cannot be measured by the methods it uses. It remains of course useful for looking at cost of health services and population health, for which it was originally designed.

#### 4 The research method

- 22 General practitioners interviewed
- 11 female and 11 male
- Purposive sampling for variety of participants
- Modified snowball selection
- Semi-structured interviews of 1-2 hours
- Rural, urban and remote practices
- Graduation dates from 1963-2002
- 10 identified from one culture and 12 more than one
- Data was recorded, transcribed, returned for comment
- Constant comparative analysis

This slide shows the research outline. The research participants were chosen by purposive sampling. The sample was not intended to be representative but was intended to provide a wide variety of participants in terms of age, type of practice and spiritual and religious background. Some participants were selected because they had no religious connection or belief A modified snowball method was used.

5.



The cultural background was also varied with more than half the sample identifying with two or more cultures. You can also see that from 1982 the numbers of women doctors rose rapidly.

6 The patterns of practice were also quite varied as can be seen from the table below.

### Patterns of Practice

	Urban	Rural town	Remote	GPTP
Total	14	5	2	1
Full Time	5F 5M	1F	2M	1F
Part Time	2F 2M	2F 2M		
Academic	1F 1M	1M		
Locum	1 F	1M		
Teaching	12	4	2	

### The Research Question<sup>7</sup>

New Zealand general practitioners deal with spiritual issues in their practice and for themselves?

This question allows the researcher to examine both the spiritual issues for the doctor and the spiritual issues arising in consultations with their patients. It is important, at this point, to clarify the difference between religion and spirituality. Spirituality is an underlying human characteristic and religion provides a way of ordering spirituality in beliefs, rituals and community.

Spirituality is an underlying aspect of humanity. It is the unique capacity to creatively connect, which is exercised in relation to self, other human beings, the natural world and the transcendent. These four aspects of spirituality are found in most cultures and in many analyses of spirituality.

Spirituality is prior to science, an inherent property of human beings<sup>2</sup>. It is an embodied awareness and experience, with tendrils that reach every part and every level of the human person. It makes connections, enters into dialogue, thereby empowering humans by enabling continuing growth and transformation. It may or may not be mediated by religious practice. There is a secular spirituality.

## 8 Table of Religious Attachment

Past Attachment		Present Attachment
Anglican	7	3
Catholic	4	1
Presbyterian	1	
Baptist	2	
Islam	1	
PIC	2	
Methodist	1	
Buddhist	1	1
Evangelical	1	
Indigenous	1	
CCC	1	1
House Church	1	1
<b>NONE</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>15</b>

# Some participants have moved through more than one religion

\*Pacific Island Church

\*\* Christian Community Church

## others attend various churches occasionally

This thesis primarily focuses on spirituality. However it is impossible to exclude religion from the research since this is a common way of ordering spirituality. It is important to realise some participants had moved through more than one religion, so the total in the past attachment column is more than 22. PIC is Pacific Island church and CCC is Christian community church.

The religious attendance of the participants was quite high with four attending regularly, eleven occasionally including two with no religious attachment, and seven not attending any religious services. Many of the occasional attendance group said they went to support patients and families at funerals.

What was very interesting was their response to a question about prayer – for themselves or their patients. Seventeen said they prayed, including ten with no religious affiliation and one who had no religious attachment ever. One (not the Buddhist) used a prayer wheel. 14 prayed for both self and other; 1 for other, 1 used a prayer wheel. 10 who prayed had no current religious affiliation. 3 doctors prayed for patients in their surgery on request. 3 said patients prayed for them

## **9 How did they understand spirituality?**

Connection

Mystery

Uniqueness

Unknowable – beyond rational and religious

Centre of self

Meaning and purpose

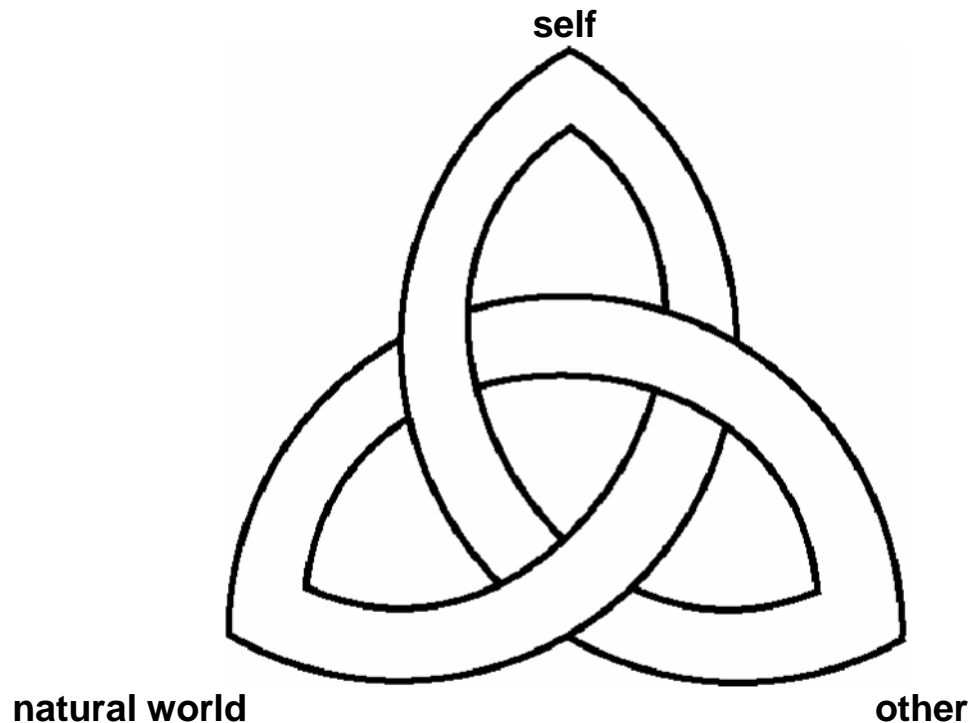
Growth and transitions - Seeking right path

Religious beliefs

All participants were asked what they understood by spirituality. Some struggled to find words to describe this. Quite frequently they were not able to, but at a later point in the interview their underlying beliefs and experiences were put very clearly.

It was interesting how often people were at a loss for words to describe it. 'It's difficult', 'I don't really know what it means' 'so there is something about spirit which is essentially unknowable' and so on. There were also many comments on spirituality being

unique in each person. This suggests any system of religious dogma is inadequate in describing spiritual uniqueness.



Spirituality and connection

**10** The overriding theme of spirituality was about connection. It was very clearly put by some participants. The diagram attempts to show the interconnection of the spiritual with self, other, the natural world and the transcendent. The transcendent is within and around each aspect and is indicated by the golden background colour.

The three leaves of the diagram represent the self the natural world and the human other. The gold background represents the transcendent within each aspect of spirituality and without. The beauty of this diagram is that it shows the intimate interconnection of spirituality so that although it is possible to speak about aspects of spirituality, in relation to the self, the other, the natural world and transcendent in reality all aspects are interconnected and changes in one aspect inevitably affect all the others. Because it is a dynamic and ever changing state it is impossible to define – but possible to talk about different aspects of it.

There was a great deal of variation in the amount of reflection that participants had done about spirituality. Some had not really reflected about it, or agreed to participate in order to reflect, while others had clearly spent much time and effort on considering spirituality in their lives. Some chose to be interviewed in order to reflect on spirituality.

The other aspect of a uniquely New Zealand spirituality that emerged was that of Maori spirituality. This appears to be a spirituality in which the world is still an enchanted, interconnected, sacred place as it was in pre-enlightenment Christianity. This sense of interconnection seems to touch all spirituality in New Zealand. One participant put it clearly when asked what spirituality was:

If there's one word, I suppose I'd use the word connected...(7)

And went on to say :

**11** So I was born in this place here. Under this mountain, that's our spiritual home. Our connection to this place is embraced in that *Titirangi*...And the river that comes down here is *Uawanui-Atuamatua* . So the tribal people are the *Hauiti* who are descendents of an ancestor called *Hauiti* related to *Pororangi*. And so from *Pororangi* comes *Ngati Poro* – the people all the descendents....And so that's the relationship between the East Coast and down south. The people of the south island, the *Ngai Tahu* people is through her...So, yes, I was born here, a long story about that birth, and I'm from here and not surprisingly I'm still here.(7)

What was very interesting was the way in which this well earthed spirituality affected many of the non-Maori New Zealand participants in their passionate sense of connection to the natural world. Below are some quotes from the participants.

## **12 Connection with self**

It's very difficult to come up with a tidy definition. . It's about the core, the centre of you....It's the best part of me, that wants to care for others. It's also about using your talents for the good of others...We can only do what – each of us has been given something and we have to find from which we're at – the better self I suppose...(19)



## **Connection with other**

Just connecting with them is part of the process. Connecting and showing a willingness to reconnect. So that you become a sustaining thread.(18)  
It's about the essence of being human I think. Which is partly about yourself, but a lot of it is about your relationship to other human beings and to, you know, the physical earth as well.(3)

## **13 Essentially unknowable**

And.. so there is something about spirit which is essentially unknowable for me. And probably, maybe that's just the essence that is unknowable. And will for ever be. I've no expectation of ever understanding it, or even a desire to. I mean it is so, its like trying to imagine the end of the universe. I'm never going to try...I feel like that about the spirit. We're aware of it. We know there is a universe that goes on and on, we know there is spirit, but um, I don't even struggle to come to terms with it (6)

Because if you actually give a contribution that actually gives a lot of meaning in your life. But on the other way things that you believe maybe you won't see or you can't see currently but you still believe in them. That's also another meaning of my life I find. For example , in my religion we believe in re-incarnation which...you can't see in front of your eyes, but I still believe in that concept. (12)

## **14 Meaning and purpose**

I am hugely aware of how we all need some source of meaning in our lives and I think that whole notion is best captured by the term spirituality – seeking for meaning. And I find it very hard to articulate beyond that.... I was generalising from my own personal need, sometimes I would think of myself as an atheist in search of conversion. So I think we all need some source of meaning in the sense often supplied by religion.(18)

I mean I don't have a religion per se, but I do believe that there is a reason for us being here....To me it's almost like a fourth dimension to a person. Perhaps it's your subconscious encouraging you to point in a certain direction or giving you guidance. (9)

## **Growth and transitions**

But I do believe there is something there...is it without of me – or is it within me. I'm not entirely sure I can answer that. ...And I think that's basically what my idea of spirituality... is. It is growing within me as a person so I can be the

best that I can be. And by the best I don't mean materialistically the best or whatever, but the best person that I can be....(16)

## **Connection with higher power**

And the concept of something great out there is much more concrete for some and much more nebulous for others. I think that for all of us there is something. (8)

There's a Samoan e....It's God within, really. Isn't it. I really don't know how to describe it, it's called Va, and it means, it's like God, but I suspect it's a pre-John Williams God. Its more of an ether. And it's within and without. And it's everywhere. And it's a God concept. (5)

I am not so clear in my mind about the God and what that involves. But I still believe that there is a God and I feel very comfortable with that thought and I use it in my practice.... Even though that God figure is not as clear in my mind or shaky, I will still tune in with a someone.(14)

## **15 Spiritual experiences**

These were extremely varied and unique as you can see from the slide. Some were in relation to the doctor and other in relation to a patient, family member, or the natural world.

Transcendent presence  
Feeling sent to someone  
Unexpected healing  
Extraordinary human experiences  
Foresight  
Out of body experience  
Near death  
Experiencing spirits  
Ineffable experience beyond words

### **Transcendent presence**

And I just went up the hill, and just got up to the top and was thinking – Oh! this is beautiful.- all the gorse was in flower and we had the fragrance. And there were the yellow headed finches, you know. And they flew with me as I got up and I was listening to this music and it was utter, utter, I was in a different world. You know my endorphins were good enough, the finches were with me, the music was with me, and the gorse smelt beautiful and the clouds

were beautiful, and it was truly a spiritual experience and I think that people who can pray properly probably feel that. (reflective silence)(11)

### **Feeling sent to someone**

And she lived alone.. She loved her cat and would stroke it and say “She and I will go together. And you know I never go out for lunch because it’s always busy. It was a beautiful day and I thought – I’ll go for a wee walk. And I went ... past her house and her roses were beautiful so I just lingered to sniff one of the roses and I saw the cat lying on the driveway. And it was very still and I thought – is that cat alright!. And you know when I got there it was dead. And I thought – Oh God – this is Mrs D’s house. I’d better just go and check.... So I went in and called her. There was no reply and the doors were open and I knew her bedroom and there she was in her bedroom gasping .... And so I just held her and she died. (11)

### **Unexpected healing**

A young man who ...had been admitted ... I can’t remember what the circumstances, but he refused to eat anything whatsoever...(for ten days) And the ward rang me this day...Would you be able to come up and maybe have a talk to him. All my thoughts said – no this is ridiculous and a waste of time. But I did...I sat on his bed and put my hand on his arm...And the door was open and there were people running about...And I thought – this is just a total waste of time, being here. So I basically prayed and I said – Lord, there’s nothing I can do about this, but if there’s anything to be done maybe you can. And as I finished saying that. To myself. He propped himself on the bed and he leaned over and he took a banana from the bowl beside the bed and peeled it and ate it. (20)

### **Outside self / ineffable experience beyond words**

I got to the end of praying. I got really angry with God. And I got to the end of praying so all I had was my inner, kind of groans of emotion to let go. And in a way that’s really important to me....Because (became tearful) because it’s important...prayer beyond words. And the words, I’ve always been full of them...I don’t think I can say anything more about that at the moment. (4)

But when you can truly sit in the patients shoes and get drawn in I think there are times when that happens and everything stops for a moment, and, and in that moment I think, and that’s the moment you’ve got to shake yourself out of when the patient’s gone. But I can’t get any closer to it than that unfortunately..(8)

## **Extraordinary human experiences**

### **Foresight**

I knew the moment my mother had died. I was coming back on the school bus and at 4 o'clock I said "Oh, I think she's died" Which seems an odd thing for a sixteen year old to say and when I got off the bus I found subsequently at four o'clock she had died. So for me that was quite powerful at the time. (9)

### **Out of body experience**

I had another patient ...it was all a bit incoherent, ...he said I was in ----'s room a few months ago and I collapsed, ... He said 'I found myself over at the door, looking back at ... me, slumped forward in the chair and him attending to me.' He was totally freaked out by it.(4)

### **Near Death experience**

I've had a patient who had a cardiac arrest who I resuscitated who very clearly was leaving himself and being pulled back again...And he described very clearly leaving himself and going towards this big hill and light and then being pulled back again. And he sort of said jokingly he really wished I hadn't pulled him back, but he now knew what was ahead of him and he wasn't afraid any more. (20)

### **Seeing or experiencing spirits**

Well I had this patient... he's an older Maori man ...  
When he's unwell he speaks about spirits and says he's visited by people in his house....And I think that's a privilege too, he tells me that, because when he goes to hospital he doesn't tell anyone.(2)

### **Sense of presence of dead person**

I think after a person dies you can still be, particularly with people you've been close to or connected to, you can still be in contact with that person. Yes.(9)

## **16 Spiritual self care**

Spiritual self care was asked about in the interviews. Participants came up with a number of ways of caring for their spiritual self. They agreed that it was important to take care of themselves and almost all wished to do something creative apart from their work. As can be seen from the slide many were extremely creative. However there were also others who failed to give themselves time. The commonest reason for this was the culture of the

practice they were in. There was also a sense that for some it was considered selfish to take time for themselves.

**17** I have included psychic self care as well because as you can see there are area of overlap between these two aspects of being human just as there are of the physical and relational aspects which we have no time to cover.

### **Spirit**

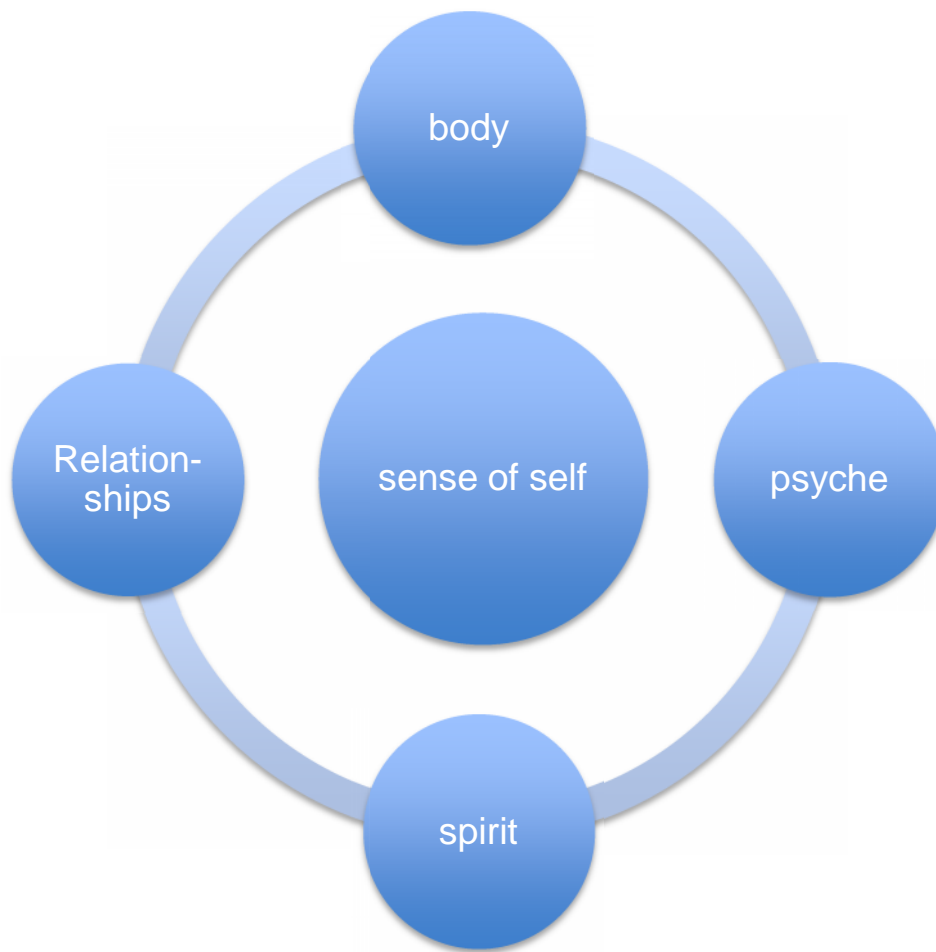
- Self awareness
- Taking time to be in solitude
- Connecting with natural world
- Meditation
- Mindfulness/grounding
- Creative activity – writing, sewing, music, gardening, woodwork, singing, drama, photography, painting, cooking, craft work etc
- Spiritual/Religious activities
- Rituals
- Visiting healing places

### **Psyche**

- Choosing appropriate work load
- Leaving work at work
- Ongoing learning
- Reading
- Thankfulness
- Forgiveness
- Relaxation exercises
- Clinical supervision
- Mentoring
- Travelling
- Sharing laughter – films/theatre/friends

The reality of whole person care is about balance – physical, mental, social and spiritual. This applies equally to both the participant doctors and their patients.

### **18 A matter of balance**



From all that has emerged it can be said that spirituality is very much part of general practice. It is unique, embodied, a search, a journey, a paradox. It has stops and starts and may be lonely and painful as well as fulfilling and enlivening. It continues from first cry to last breath. For GP's it is a journey enlivened and accompanied by patients.

I will leave the last word to this participant who put it so well.

**19** I think to some extent, in a secular world ... there is a priestly function. Of confession. Of hearing people's secrets and truths and fears, and not, at least trying not to judge those. And I think that is, that's a sacred task. I think there is something, there is an aspect of healing in the literal laying on of hands. And whether that is examining a chest, or taking a blood pressure or feeling a pulse, there is something that occurs in that interaction which is more than

just in their physical action. A transfer of compassion as well in crucial times.(10)

**20**Thank you very much.