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.

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
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

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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