

Where is spirituality on New Zealand's national health agenda?

Conspicuous by its absence say Dr. Richard Egan of the Cancer Society Social & Behavioural Research Unit, Dunedin School of Medicine, University of Otago; and Hilda Johnson-Bogaerts, Director of The Selwyn Institute (of ageing and spirituality), Selwyn Foundation Auckland.

Research, along with 'real life' experience, indicates the role of spirituality deserves more than just debate; particularly in the context of creating meaningful environments and establishing guidelines to help older people age well.

In the August 2016 edition of the internationally-regarded *Psychology Today*, under the title *The Surprising Health Benefits of Spirituality*, Stanford University's Dr. Emma Seppala makes the claim that those that have a spiritual element to their lives:

- Report being 'very happy';
- Have a longer life;
- Have a lower risk of depression and suicide;
- Are more resilient;
- Develop more faithful and enduring relationships;
- Have happier children and are more satisfied with family life.

Based on these tangible, and deliverable, outcomes, and indicative of a growing evidence base, tapping into a spiritual 'wellspring', as part of any serious national ageing agenda, would have to be a proverbial 'no brainer'.

From our work and experience this would certainly be our view. So why are we not embracing the opportunity as fully as we could, or should?

Part of the challenge is the many ways spirituality can be understood, along with preconceptions fair or otherwise.

For millennia, and across the full spectrum of cultures and societies, spirituality has been linked with health, healing, well-being, tradition, history and overall life satisfaction.

Meaning, and connection, as part of the human condition is nothing new. We need a 'why' to live for, at any age. For many this is the essence of spirituality.

In most countries, and cultures, however, until recently the dominant practice and driving influence on spiritual aspects of peoples' lives has been organized religion.

Along with everything else in modern life convention has been challenged. As a consequence, what people now regard as sources of spirituality have dramatically changed.

When we're talking about spirituality, what exactly do we mean?

In the May 2014 *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, Dr. Christine Puchalski and fellow contributors offered this definition:

Spirituality is a dynamic and intrinsic aspect of humanity through which persons seek ultimate meaning, purpose, and transcendence, and experience relationship to self, family, others, community, society, nature, and the significant or sacred. Spirituality is expressed through beliefs, values, traditions, and practices.

In the context of a national focus on positive ageing, in 2010 leading on-line medical information destination for physicians and health care providers *Medscape*, observed why a re-focus on spirituality is taking place.

Interest in spirituality and aging has increased recently, owing to overwhelming evidence of positive health outcomes linked to spirituality and religious participation. Increasing longevity in modern society puts spiritual needs of older adults at the forefront of societal priorities.

Understanding individual spiritual perspectives becomes increasingly important, given the issues of loss, physical illness and mortality that are confronted in old age.

There are multiple barriers to the proper assessment of spirituality in clinical practice and research.

Integrating an individual's spiritual practice into their healthcare can help shape personalized medical care for older adults and improve health outcomes.

Spirituality, therefore, when understood broadly, is ultimately self-defined and experienced. However, there are commonalities that international leader in the movement to integrate spirituality into healthcare in clinical settings Christina Puchalski has identified. Her view is that spirituality is an inherent and fundamental component of being human. Spirituality is different from the psychological domain, which traditionally focuses on cognitive behavior, though there are obvious links.

Spirituality's renewed focus as a fundamental part of the ageing journey

In light of this 'renaissance', many countries have engaged in a more serious, and formal approach to understanding, debate and policy formulation on spirituality's influence and role.

Scottish-based charitable organization *Iriss* in 2013—working to promote positive outcomes for people who use the country's social services—considered spirituality across all aspects of community care and building.

They concluded:

- Ageing is a journey which includes a spiritual dimension.
- The spiritual dimension focuses on meaning of life, hope and purpose, explored through relationships with others, with the natural world and with the transcendent.
- The evidence base suggests that genuine and intentional accompaniment of people on their ageing journey; giving time, presence and listening are the core of good spiritual practice.
- Reminiscence, life story, creative activities and meaningful rituals all help the process of coming to terms with ageing and change.

Closer to home *Meaningful Ageing Australia* is the national body for spiritual care and ageing. Their mission is to enable access to high quality pastoral and spiritual care for all older people in the country.

For them:

Spirituality is integral to, but not confined by, religion and faith. It is about what gives us a purpose to our lives. It is about our sources of meaning and hope, which in turn is intimately related to our connectedness to ourselves, to others and to the world.

There is now a large body of emerging evidence showing that pastoral and spiritual care is an essential part of holistic care.

Their experience (and NZ research) shows that there are many working in aged care who understand the value of pastoral and spiritual care and want to have the conversations around spirituality, but tend to stay at a superficial level because they don't feel they have the knowledge or skills to respond at a deeper level. To lead and improve spiritual care the Australians have developed *Guidelines for Spiritual Care in the context of Aged Care*.

Our own view on spirituality

While New Zealand has the opportunity to learn from these initiatives we, in fact, are already advanced in acknowledging spirituality as part of integrated health and well-being regimens in some areas. Māori, Pacific and many religious NGOs implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, acknowledge and operationalize spirituality in their work. Mason Durie's ubiquitous model of health, Te Whare Tapa Wha, includes spirituality/wairua. This model is taught in all State schools and healthcare professional undergraduate courses.

At a policy level, cancer care leads the way, stating that "all staff working in cancer treatment services have a basic understanding of the spiritual needs of people with cancer". Yet much of this is aspirational rather than everyday practice.

Also in the area of cancer care, *He Anga Whakaahuru—A supportive care framework*, includes guidelines, competencies and standards for spiritual well-being as part of an integrated model.

Outside of these examples, spirituality, when examined across New Zealand's health policy, professional guidelines, pre and in-service health education, standards and competencies, is largely lacking.

We would like to challenge those who are reviewing aged care, healthy ageing and the health system generally, to include spirituality into not just the policy frameworks, but also consider the development of New Zealand-specific national guidelines on spirituality.

This step would then provide the frame of reference for further understanding, and engagement, with this important aspect of the country's national health and well-being. It may go some way in further meeting our commitments to the Treaty of Waitangi. It may work towards greater cultural competence across our multi-cultural ageing and health sectors.

The goal has been set. It is our responsibility to take up the challenge starting with identification, understanding and, of course, meaningful and sustainable action.