Spirituality and Religion in Oncology

John R. Peteet, MD1; Michael J. Balboni, PhD, ThM, MDiv2

Despite the difficulty in clearly defining and measuring spirituality, a growing literature describes its importance in oncology and survivorship. Religious/spiritual beliefs influence patients’ decision-making with respect to both complementary therapies and aggressive care at the end of life. Measures of spirituality and spiritual well-being correlate with quality of life in cancer patients, cancer survivors, and caregivers. Spiritual needs, reflective of existential concerns in several domains, are a source of significant distress, and care for these needs has been correlated with better psychological and spiritual adjustment as well as with less aggressive care at the end of life. Studies show that while clinicians such as nurses and physicians regard some spiritual care as an appropriate aspect of their role, patients report that they provide it infrequently. Many clinicians report that their religious/spiritual beliefs influence their practice, and practices such as mindfulness have been shown to enhance clinician self-care and equanimity. Challenges remain in the areas of conceptualizing and measuring spirituality, developing and implementing training for spiritual care, and coordinating and partnering with chaplains and religious communities. CA Cancer J Clin. 2013;63:280-289. © 2013 American Cancer Society.

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Introduction

A 45-year-old mother with a new diagnosis of breast cancer found it difficult to pray and wondered if God was trying to punish her, or to teach her a lesson. After a year of treatment for ovarian cancer, a 60-year-old woman found that practicing mindfulness made her more appreciative of each day.

Spirituality remains difficult to precisely define and measure, but there is general agreement that it refers to a connection with a larger reality that gives one’s life meaning, experienced through a religious tradition or, increasingly in secular Western culture, through meditation, nature, or art.1 Some definitions emphasize differences between spirituality and religion,2,3 other definitions stress their overlapping dimensions,4 and still others favor the concept of religion over spirituality within health research because the latter is more difficult to reliably measure.5 Nevertheless, a growing literature explores the role of spirituality and religion in oncology. Given the inevitable overlap between religion and spirituality, and their importance as both resources and sources of distress for patients throughout the trajectory of cancer, we review here the place of religion/spirituality (R/S) in adjustment to cancer; the provision of spiritual care; and the role of spirituality in the experience of medical decision-makers, survivors, caregivers, and providers.

Adjustment to Cancer

Research has correlated measures of spirituality and of spiritual well-being with better quality of life (QOL) and/or psychosocial functioning in the context of prostate cancer,6-8 breast cancer,9-11 oncology-related anxiety and depression,12,13 radiation therapy,14 and gynecologic cancer.15,16 In a study by Steinhauser et al,17 patients viewed “being at peace with God” and “freedom from pain” as the most important characteristics of QOL in terminal illness. Similarly, religious coping has been associated with better patient psychological well-being and overall QOL among patients with advanced cancer.18 At least 11 studies of posttraumatic growth have shown links to R/S, most of them beneficial.19 Investigators have found positive religious coping, readiness to face existential questions, religious participation, and intrinsic religiousness to be typically associated with posttraumatic growth.

However, distress or struggle over spiritual concerns (eg, feeling abandoned by God) has been found to be prevalent among patients with advanced cancer.18,20-23 In a study of 100 patients with advanced cancer in an outpatient palliative care clinic in Texas, most of whom considered themselves both spiritual and religious, spiritual pain was both common and associated with lower self-perceived religiosity and QOL.24 In a Boston-based study of 75 patients with advanced cancer, the majority (86%) endorsed at least one

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Table 1. Qualitatively Grounded Religious/Spiritual Themes in Patients’ Experiences of Advanced Cancer

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEME</th>
<th>NO. (%)</th>
<th>REPRESENTATIVE QUOTE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coping through religion/spirituality</td>
<td>39 (74)</td>
<td>I don’t know if I will survive this cancer, but without God it is hard to stay sane sometimes. For me, religion and spirituality keep me going.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious/spiritual practices</td>
<td>31 (58)</td>
<td>I pray a lot. It helps. You find yourself praying an awful lot. Not for myself, but for those you leave behind. There will be a lot more praying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious/spiritual beliefs</td>
<td>28 (53)</td>
<td>It is God’s will, not my will. My job is to do what I can to stay healthy—eat right, think positively, get to appointments on time, and also to do what I can to become healthy again, like make sure that I have the best doctors to take care of me. After this, it is up to God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious/spiritual transformation</td>
<td>20 (38)</td>
<td>Since I have an incurable disease that will shorten my life, it has made me focus on issues of mortality and sharpened my curiosity on religion/spirituality and what the various traditions have to say about that. I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about those issues, and it has enriched my psychological, intellectual, and spiritual experience of this time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious/spiritual community</td>
<td>11 (21)</td>
<td>Well, I depend a lot upon my faith community for support. It’s proven incredibly helpful for me.</td>
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Spiritual concern, with a median of 4 concerns noted per patient. Younger age was associated with a greater burden of spiritual concerns, and increased spiritual concerns were associated with worse psychological QOL.18 A longitudinal study of women with breast cancer25 suggested that women who are less spiritually/religiously involved prior to the onset of breast cancer and who attempt to mobilize these resources under the stress of diagnosis may experience a process of spiritual struggle and doubt that can influence their long-term adjustment. In an effort to identify patterns of differences, Kristeller et al26 distinguished 4 clusters within a study of 114 cancer patients: those with high R/S (45%), who showed the lowest levels of depression; those with low R/high S (25%), who also demonstrated good adjustment; negative religious copers (14%), who were found to have the highest levels of depression; and those with low R/S, who demonstrated the poorest adjustment to cancer.

Qualitative studies of oncology patients concerning the role of R/S in their illness9,21,27-29 have identified a number of recurring themes. The study by Alcorn et al21 of 68 randomly selected US patients with advanced cancer found 5 primary themes: coping, practices, beliefs, transformation, and community (Table 1).

Of note, approximately 78% of the patients interviewed said that R/S had been important to the cancer experience. Most interviews (75%) contained 2 or more R/S themes, with 45% mentioning 3 or more R/S themes. Furthermore, most participants (85%) identified one or more R/S concerns spanning the 5 R/S themes. Younger, more religious, and more spiritual patients identified R/S concerns more frequently.

By comparison with these findings in Western patient populations, in a Taiwanese sample of 33 patients with advanced cancer, Hsiao et al20 found that less individualistic themes of hope, peacefulness, meaning, dignity, and harmony predominated. Similarly, interviews with 15 terminally ill Taiwanese patients found that they emphasized serenity in “letting go,” self-reflection about responsibilities, and connectedness with others.31

Spiritual needs, defined to include both distressing spiritual struggles and spiritual seeking (eg, seeking forgiveness, thinking about what gives meaning to life), were found in 86% of patients with advanced cancer studied by Winkelman et al,18 and in 91% of patients with advanced cancer studied by Pearce et al.32 Unmet spiritual needs, including negative religious coping (eg, anger at God),13 have been associated with lower QOL18,33,34 and psychological adjustment.32

**Spiritual Care**

A majority of patients who have been asked the question say that they consider attention to spiritual concerns to be an important part of cancer care by physicians and nurses.34,35 Defining spiritual care as support for specific spiritual needs, Pearce et al32 found that 150 patients with advanced cancer surveyed during their inpatient stay at a southeastern US medical center both desired and received spiritual care from their health care providers (67% and 68%, respectively), religious community (78% and 73%, respectively), and hospital chaplain (45% and 36%, respectively), but that a significant subset received less spiritual care than desired from their health care providers (17%), religious community (11%), and chaplain (40%). Patients who received less spiritual care than desired reported more depressive symptoms and less meaning and peace. By comparison, 47% of patients with advanced cancer in a multicenter US study reported that their spiritual needs were being minimally or not met by their religious community, and 72% reported that their spiritual needs were being minimally or not met by the medical system.36
This is similar to the finding that 50% of patients in an inpatient palliative care center in Korea said their spiritual needs were not addressed, but at odds with the only 18% of patients studied at St. Vincent’s Hospital in New York City who reported that their spiritual needs were not being met.

Spiritual care as measured by patients’ reports that the health care team supported their R/S needs has been correlated with better satisfaction with care, psychological and spiritual adjustment, and less aggressive care at the end of life (EOL), as well as with attendant lower EOL costs, particularly among racial/ethnic minorities and high religious coping patients. By comparison, the same group found that R/S support from religious communities predicted more aggressive care at the EOL, suggesting that collaboration with and education of religious communities may be strategies to help reduce aggressive care at the EOL. It is interesting to note that a cross-sectional survey of 3585 hospitals found significantly lower rates of hospital deaths and higher rates of hospice enrollment in those that provided chaplaincy services.

Attending to the spiritual needs of patients has begun to be formally recognized by professional spiritual care providers, health care councils, and regulatory agencies such as the Joint Commission, the National Consensus Project Guidelines for Quality Palliative Care, palliative care clinicians, and health care delivery systems over the past 30 years. However, research on spiritual care and chaplaincy care is in its infancy, as chaplains, humanities scholars, and empirical researchers have yet to generate widely accepted research-based definitions of spirituality, spiritual care, and chaplaincy practice that could be used in studies of outcome and efficacy. Existing research into the core elements of oncology spiritual care programs has shown that organizational and institutional issues are significant, often underrecognized factors in the success of such programs. Sinclair et al found that spiritual care programs that were centrally located within the cancer center, reported and provided guidance to senior leaders, reflected a multifaith approach, and had an academic role were better resourced, used more frequently, and viewed as integral members of an interdisciplinary care team.

An expanding literature describes the use of specific spiritual interventions in oncology, of which the best studied are mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive behavior therapy. Two critical reviews, which included 3 randomized controlled clinical trials (RCTs), found consistent evidence that MBSR approaches improve psychological functioning and well-being. In a Cochrane review of 5 RCTs (n = 1130 participants) of spiritual and religious interventions for well-being in the terminal phase of illness, 2 evaluated meditation and the others evaluated multidisciplinary palliative care interventions that involved a chaplain or spiritual counselor as a member of the intervention team. The authors found inconclusive evidence of benefit on methodological grounds, and recommended more rigorous research.

RCTs have shown efficacy of meaning-centered therapy for less seriously ill oncology patients. Breitbart et al piloted a group intervention based on Victor Frankl’s logotherapy and Lee et al showed improvements in self-esteem, self-efficacy, and optimism compared with controls using 4 individual sessions designed to address existential issues by exploring meaning-making coping strategies. In a study of 441 terminally ill patients randomized to dignity-conserving therapy, standard palliative care, or client-centered care, Chochinov et al found that dignity therapy significantly improved measures of spiritual well-being, and was met with greater satisfaction than standard palliative care.

Recognizing the broad relevance of existential concerns in oncology, physicians and nurses interested in providing spiritual care can begin by assessing the spiritual dimension of their patients’ responses to questions that address these in the domains of identity/worth (“What is my place in the world?”), hope (“What can I hope for?”), meaning/purpose (“What is most important in life?”), and relatedness (“Who can I count on?”).

**Identity/Worth**

Cancer frequently threatens roles that have defined one’s sense of self, such as work or parenting. When the illness or its treatment undermines control over a person’s body, mind, or routine, it further presses the questions of who one is, and what she is worth.

Religious believers can sometimes remind themselves that they were created by and are still loved by God. At other times, they may feel that they have let God down, and need help to look at what they believe He expects. Secularists often reaffirm a sense of worth by recalling the kinds of people they have always been, and the ways that their families and friends continue to love them even when they are dependent. Both believers and secularists may find spiritual practices (eg, meditation or listening to music) helpful in consolidating their sense of themselves in relation to what is most important.

**Hope**

Cancer is most frightening when it endangers hope. Not only does a diagnosis of cancer force the question of what is a realistic object of hope (eg, cure, more time, quality of life, or a good death), but it also raises the questions of what are one’s deepest hopes and ultimate basis for hope. Patients wonder: Can I trust God to be there for me in this life and the next?
Will my legacy in my life work or the lives of my children survive me? Helping individuals explore such questions is a central part of spiritual care.57

Meaning/Purpose
Cancer raises questions not only about what one can expect in the future, but also about how to live in the present. What matters given the time available? Are my old priorities still valid? Exploring these questions sometimes gives rise to a disturbing crisis of meaning but if one can see a reason for living each day can seem precious. With enough energy, one can then fully engage pursuits because he or she has actively chosen them. Talking with other individuals who have struggled with these questions can help the new cancer patient move from crisis to commitment.52

Connectedness
Another fundamental question raised by cancer is: “Who is there for me?” Patients not only wonder whether family and friends will pick up new responsibilities for their care, but “How does this change our relationship?” and “Will anyone be able to understand, and stay the course with me?” Religious patients with cancer may feel abandoned by God or struggle to recover a sense of His presence; they may also feel more sustained by Him than by any human being. Prayer, worship, or sacraments can become very important to them. Nonreligious individuals often value sharing their ultimate concerns with another human being. Personal support provided by cards, telephone calls, or offers of help either from one’s religious community or from one’s neighborhood can be powerfully moving for those who find themselves disconnected and alone. Hospital chaplains, who typically provide care to unbelievers as well as to believers, are experienced in addressing obstacles to reconnection to one’s faith. Examples include ambivalence toward one’s religious upbringing, previous churches, or clergy; anger at God for allowing illness; guilt over being divorced; or pressure from a family member to convert.58

Clinicians may find acronyms useful in recalling the relevance of the basic elements of a spiritual history (Table 2).59,60 but creative attempts are also emerging to develop and test practical ways for clinicians to provide spiritual assistance within the medical setting. For example, in a study of 118 of their patients, 4 hematology-oncologists found that using a brief (5–7 minutes), oncologist-assisted, semistructured exploration of R/S concerns was comforting for them 85% of the time and that 76% of patients believed the intervention was “somewhat” to “very” useful. At 3 weeks, the intervention group showed greater reductions in depressive symptoms, improvement in QOL, and an improved sense of interpersonal caring from their physician.61 McCauley et al62 assigned a 28-minute video and workbook encouraging spiritual coping to 100 chronically ill patients. Energy improved in the intervention group, and while improvements in pain, mood, health perceptions, illness intrusiveness, and self-efficacy were not statistically significant, the exercise was inoffensive to patients and required no additional clinician time.

Nonetheless, few empirical data are available on the nature of spiritual care being provided by oncology physicians and nurses,57 or on the use of interventions such as patient-practitioner prayer in the setting of cancer. There are several helpful case illustrations describing how clinicians may engage patient R/S.63-67 Case examples in the literature have limitations, however, because practice suggestions by medical professionals have tended to be anecdotal rather than empirically grounded. For example, several clinical commentaries caution against a practice of patient-practitioner prayer in the setting of cancer. Nevertheless, in a cross-sectional, multisite, mixed-methods study of patients with advanced cancer (n = 70), oncology physicians (n = 206), and oncology nurses, Balboni et al38 found that most cancer patients (71%), nurses (83%), and physicians (65%) believed that patient-initiated patient-practitioner prayer was at least occasionally appropriate, and most patients viewed prayer as spiritually supportive. The study concluded that the appropriateness of patient-specific prayer is case-specific, and requires consideration of multiple factors including a preexisting relationship, knowledge of patient openness toward R/S, and R/S concordance in the

### Table 2. Spiritual History Tools

These acronyms remind clinicians of basic historical information that is useful in caring for oncology patients.

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<th>SPIRIT</th>
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<td>F: Faith and beliefs</td>
<td>S: Spiritual belief system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I: Importance of spirituality in the patient’s life</td>
<td>I: Integration with a spiritual community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Spiritual Community of support</td>
<td>P: Personal spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A: How does the patient wish spiritual issues to be Addressed in his or her care</td>
<td>R: Ritualized practices and restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I: Implications for medical care</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T: Terminal events planning</td>
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patient–practitioner relationship. Similarly, a 2009 consensus conference focused on spiritual care within palliative care has emphasized the central role of hospital chaplains within the spiritual care of patients receiving palliative care. The consensus conference highlighted the importance of medical professionals screening for patient spiritual issues/needs and then providing a referral to hospital chaplaincy who hold expert training in spiritual care provision. This is a common-sense, interdisciplinary approach that removes some of the burden from medical professionals and upholds the underrecognized but key support that chaplains provide within an oncology context. However, some notable tensions associated with this model include the insufficient number of chaplains available to support patients’ spiritual needs, the provision of cancer care in the outpatient setting, and the inappropriateness of support patients’ spiritual needs, the provision of cancer care training of medical professionals.

**Spiritual Model of Spiritual Care**

Religion and spirituality can also influence the medical decisions of patients with cancer. In a study of 100 patients with lung cancer, patients and their caregivers cited religious faith as the second most important factor influencing treatment decisions, after oncologist recommendations. Spirituality in patients with cancer has been associated with more aggressive care at the EOL, the mechanisms responsible require further study.

Spirituality is an important component in the QOL of many survivors of cancer, particularly as their physical concerns recede. Measures of existential concerns (eg, experiential struggles) appear to be more relevant than those of religious activity (eg, attendance at services). Interviews with survivors highlight several themes, such as enhancement of peace and meaning and personal growth. Factors mediating these themes in different individuals may include restoration of a belief in a just world and socio-demographic and psychological variables, emphasizing the need for an individualized, psychologically and spiritually integrated approach to survivorship.

R/S and life philosophy have been found to play a diverse but important role in the lives of most, but not all, family members of patients with ovarian, pediatric, and prostate cancers. In a large-scale survey study of former palliative caregivers, 4.7% identified that additional spiritual support would have been helpful to them; these individuals were also more likely to say that a number of other additional supports would have been helpful, suggesting the importance of stress and its timing. Similarly, spirituality plays an important role in some, but not all, bereaved individuals. Since bereavement is a life crisis that challenges one’s assumptions about human existence and provides the grounds for spiritual change, it is not surprising that spiritual beliefs and practices can influence the process of grieving, reassessing one’s identity, reengaging life, and struggling religiously, for example with anger toward God, which has been associated with poorer adjustment to cancer and bereavement. Meert et al point out that health care providers can help parents of pediatric patients deal with their spiritual needs by providing a safe environment, opportunities to stay connected with their child at the time of death, and ways to remember their child in the future. Studies have also shown MBSR to be helpful to the caregivers of patients with cancer.

A national survey by Curlin et al found that physicians were as religious as the general US population. However, some disciplines including psychiatry were less religious, and there was regional variation (eg, Northeast vs South). In a Boston-based survey, oncologists were significantly more likely to describe themselves as neither spiritual nor religious more often than oncology nurses and terminally ill patients. A national study found that 85% of pediatric oncology faculty described themselves as spiritual and that 60% of gynecologic oncologists surveyed “agreed” or “somewhat agreed” that spiritual beliefs were a source of personal comfort. Approximately 45% of respondents in this survey reported that their R/S beliefs sometimes, frequently, or always...
play a role in the medical options they offer patients, but only 34% indicated that they “frequently” or “always” take a R/S history from patients.

As noted above, several studies have suggested that most patients want their health care providers to address their R/S concerns. In a survey of 75 patients and 339 cancer physicians and nurses, Phelps et al found that the majority of patients (77.9%), physicians (71.6%), and nurses (85.1%) believed that routine spiritual care would have a positive impact on patients, but that only 25% of patients had previously received spiritual care. Objections to spiritual care are frequently related to professional role conflicts. Others have found that discussion of R/S issues is a communication skill that trainees consider to be more advanced than other commonly taught communication skills. In an effort to address both of these obstacles, Todres et al described an innovative, intensive, clinical pastoral experience for clinicians; graduates reported an improved awareness of spiritual distress in others and themselves, as well as new language for, and more meaningful ways of relating to, patients and families. The importance of spiritual care training for oncology professionals is highlighted in a study that found the strongest predictor of spiritual care provision by nurses and physicians was the reception of spiritual care training. However, most oncology nurses and physicians have not received prior spiritual care training (88% and 86%, respectively; P = .83). Table 3 contains Web-based and print resources for those interested in learning more about such training.

Spirituality is integral to the ways that many clinicians care for themselves in order to avoid compassion fatigue and burnout. In one study, oncology clinicians who identified themselves as religious were reported to have a lower rate of burnout. Another study of 230 physicians showed an inverse correlation between spirituality and burnout.

Finally, interest continues to grow in the use of mindfulness meditation by clinicians to enhance self-awareness and equanimity. Trials of 8 weeks of MBSR in health care professionals demonstrated significant improvements in stress reduction, quality of life, empathy, and compassion for the self.

**Remaining Challenges**

Challenging questions remain for those interested in addressing the spiritual aspects of oncology care. Perhaps the most basic is how to define spirituality in a way that allows for measurement (by researchers, clinicians, and administrators) but takes into account its complexity. Despite a proliferation of spiritual assessment tools and suggested conceptual frameworks, no consensus yet exists on how to adequately take into account religious (supernatural) and existential (universal human) dimensions, the distinction between spirituality itself and spiritual outcomes (distress or well-being), the relationship between spiritual and emotional experience (eg, as in the frequent coexistence of depression and spiritual struggle), and the heterogeneity of religious beliefs and practices across cultures. Studies cited here of Eastern populations point to meaningful differences between these and Western cohorts studied; little information is available from Africa. Religious diversity is particularly relevant at the EOL: while Buddhists want the opportunity to chant

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<th>TABLE 3. Selected Resources</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>WEB-BASED RESOURCES</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (acpe.edu and acперesearch.net/)</td>
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<tr>
<td>George Washington Institute for Spirituality and Health (gwish.org)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Healthcare Chaplaincy (healthcarechaplaincy.org)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Program on Medicine and Religion at the University of Chicago (pmr.uchicago.edu)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duke Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health (spiritualityandhealth.duke.edu)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Institute for Spirituality and Health at the Texas Medical Center (ish-tmc.org)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Center for Spirituality and Healing at the University of Minnesota (csch.umn.edu)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding (tanenbaum.org)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>NOTABLE BOOKS ON SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION, AND MEDICINE</strong></td>
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or hear others chanting, Hindus have a strong preference for dying at home and Muslims for dying facing Mecca, surrounded by loved ones.68 Another challenge is how to engage with forms of spirituality, such as indigenous ways of understanding cancer as a curse or the result of witchcraft,135 or beliefs in miracles that encourage aggressive care at the EOL.65,78 Finding answers will depend on collaboration between religious and medical communities. 

Yet another question is how to most effectively organize the delivery of spiritual care. Should clinicians focus on screening and referring patients with spiritual distress to chaplains, as the spiritual care experts on the medical team?2 Can chaplains serve as specialized resources for clinicians, for example when a patient’s and a clinician’s traditions are discordant? How does this approach allow clinicians to respond to patients who want them to address their spiritual concerns to the quality of life of advanced cancer? J Palliat Med. 2006;9:646-657.


Conclusions

Spirituality is central to the experience of many patients with cancer and their families, and most indicate a desire for help with their spiritual needs. While challenges persist, creative models for helping oncology providers learn how to address the spiritual dimension of their work have begun to emerge.

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