



PRAISE BE: Hospital chaplains provide a divine service

A doctor's blessing

The Secret Doctor's current incarnation is a lifelong atheist, from a family where the parents read their children the shorter essays of Bertrand Russell while others were telling Bible stories.

As a medical student, your correspondent was therefore inclined to bracket chaplains in the same category as homeopaths – they might make a few people feel better, but we'd get along just fine without them.

Years of medical practice have done nothing to alter my lack of religious conviction, and the compatibility of a benevolent deity with appalling human suffering is not an issue to address in a 500-word column. But on the matter of chaplains I am happy to acknowledge I was completely, 100 per cent wrong.

I still have no idea what their official duties comprise of but time and again I have watched them step in and provide a service which no one else could offer.

In my foundation year 2, I called the Catholic priest at 4am for an older woman who was bleeding to death from her upper GI cancer. The medical team, myself included, were fussing ineffectually about, wondering if there was any point giving a transfusion and whether it was too late to try cryoprecipitate.

The chaplain stayed discreetly in the background while there was any chance that our efforts might succeed but as the futility of our interventions became apparent, he stepped quietly forward and began to recite the prayers for the dying, the patient joining him in a whisper whenever she felt strong enough.

The contrast between our frantic bustle and the calm of those extraordinary words ('Go forth, Christian soul, from this world...') has stayed with me ever since. In some hospitals a number of different chaplains, each representing different faiths, can be found.

That was far from the only time I saw chaplains prove their worth. From keeping a lonely old man company during a long admission to reassuring a nervous teenager before surgery, to that most poignant of all sacraments, the emergency baptism, I have been impressed by their ability to help where all our efforts are useless.

The most unusual service I ever saw a chaplain provide was on an intensive care unit where a particular consultant tended to get more and more agitated and sharp-tongued whenever we were especially busy, to the considerable discomfort of his team. On the very worst days, when we'd all missed lunch and stress levels were approaching critical, the chaplain would appear as if by magic and discreetly slip him a bar of chocolate.

It never failed to improve matters and everyone on the unit breathed a sigh of relief. We never discovered how the chaplain knew there was a problem or worked out how to fix it. Perhaps that's what they mean by God working in a mysterious way.

By the Secret Doctor
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