about

Pastoral Carers in Palliative Care

Palliative Care Victoria
Specialist healthcare and practical support

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June 2008
What is a pastoral carer in palliative care?

A pastoral carer helps people to consider big issues such as the meaning of life and helps them to find answers to spiritual concerns and questions. In addition to pain and symptom control, palliative care provides patients and their families with whole person care. This includes a focus on the spiritual, physical, emotional, social and religious aspects of life.

Within palliative care, pastoral care is available to people of all religious backgrounds, cultures and beliefs. This includes people who do not have any religious beliefs or affiliations.

Spiritual concerns in palliative care often relate to questions about the meanings of suffering, life and death. When people are living with a terminal illness, these issues can become extremely important. Questions vary according to the individual. Concerns about the illness and how to cope with it, and about what the future holds for you and your loved ones are common.

Pastoral care workers provide spiritual support and guidance. Their work is person-centred, focussing on your concerns and questions. Pastoral care workers have a broad understanding of the spiritual beliefs of people from diverse cultures. They are trained to be good listeners and to help people to explore their own spiritual beliefs.

Working within an interdisciplinary palliative care team, pastoral care workers liaise with the leaders of faith communities and appropriate others. Pastoral care workers are professionals who have training in a relevant field. They are bound by ethical standards and confidentiality.

What can a pastoral care worker do for you?

Everyone’s spiritual needs are different. Some of the themes that people want to explore include:

- Does my life have meaning?
- Why is this happening to me?
- Who am I?
- How will my children cope without me?
- How will I cope when my loved one dies?
- What does it mean to die?
- Where do we go to when we die?
- Will I be reunited with my loved ones after death?
- Is there a God?

Pastoral care workers welcome discussion about areas of life that are sometimes difficult to bring up. These big questions are a central part of the spiritual work of pastoral care. Spiritual guidance can help to ease the way when dealing with difficult issues such as letting go, saying goodbye, forgiveness, reconciliation, and preparing for the future.

What services does a pastoral care worker offer?

- Active listening
- Clarification of needs and hopes
- Exploration of spiritual issues
- Spiritual guidance and support
- Grief, loss, and bereavement support
- Referral to an appropriate spiritual practitioner when desired
- Sharing a time of quiet reflection and contemplation
- Rituals such as prayer, blessings, and services
- An opportunity for life review
- Help with attending to unfinished business

Who can receive pastoral care?

Any person, or carer or family member of a person, who is receiving palliative care can contact the pastoral care worker who will offer support and guidance.

How do I contact a pastoral care worker?

Each palliative care team includes a pastoral care worker or someone who performs this role. You can contact the pastoral care worker directly or ask any palliative care team member to refer you.