

HOLY NATURAL



Queen Elizabeth hospital
Chapel, Birmingham:
Managers must look beyond
stereotypes

Does the Hospital chaplain still have a role in the corporate culture of the NHS, asks James Woodward

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Hospital Birmingham trust.

For centuries the Christian religion provided the framework within which people in the West understood themselves and the world. With the impact of the scientific revolution, however, Christianity gradually ceased to play this role, instead giving way to a more secular culture.

But now many people experience a vacuum of understanding in our society, and this often expresses itself in a lack of shared values and of skill in considering ethical questions.

When it comes to questions of priorities and of moral direction, religion is increasingly viewed as able to exercise influence and provide a point of reference in many aspects of our cultural, economic and political life. But it continues to be subject to unnecessary prejudice and misunderstanding. Managers would do well to look again at the nature and function of religion in their units and how it can be used to contribute to the delivery and experience of healthcare.

Patients are questioning and searching as they experience illness in all its complexity. Although they may not have any particular religious affiliation, they often ask profound theological questions. Creative and constructive engagement with these questions about meaning, purpose and value have a crucial effect on patients' restoration to health.

Chaplaincy is part of the 'quality' of healthcare, although it may not always be possible to quantify it in terms of demand, supply and efficiency. At the heart of chaplaincy is the belief that people are created for the highest and most splendid fulfilment, if only it is properly understood. This is the agenda for health and well-being, and religion can play its part in providing a greater vision of wholeness to sustain the lesser and partial visions present in healthcare.

It also has a role in the corporate dimension of our organisations. Religion has always been intensely social,

and chaplains, with their tradition of comprehensive availability, are an important resource in building the community by means of their access to all parts of the organisation: listening, supporting, interpreting and communicating with all kinds of healthcare professionals.

This informal resource for staff support can transform the corporate experience of the organisation as a community committed to care.

As the health service continues to manage change, the chaplain will have legitimate questions to ask about the values, choices and decisions that shape the delivery of care. These values and dilemmas become more apparent during radical change. Religion has for centuries developed understanding and experience of how the exercise of language means that individuals and communities are constantly choosing, judging, and valuing some things more than others.

Managers and organisations that are open and honest about ethics and values are healthy, creative and responsive.

Chaplains' close involvement in the healthcare community, and their independence, allow them to give 'detached-involved' judgement on issues, both short term and long term.

They can also help to ensure that healthcare becomes more sensitive to the multicultural needs of patients.

The Christian chaplain is in a strong position to resource and facilitate a greater understanding of other faiths, and informed practice. This can only be done by strengthening chaplaincy rather than assuming that a Christian presence undermines other faith communities.

The Christian churches are still the largest group of voluntary organisations in the country. They bridge the primary and secondary care interface and contain considerable human resources. These include finance, time, goodwill, expertise and feedback. They are rooted

in the local community.
How might the agencies
of healthcare and church
work together for health?

Managers must look
beyond prejudice or
inherited stereotype to a
resource that can be used
in many ways to provide
excellence in healthcare.
Managers, it's time to
invite your chaplain for
lunch.