

The Christian approach to whole-person medicine

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SUMMARY. A working party with representatives from the Royal College of General Practitioners and the Churches' Council for Health and Healing has produced a report on the Christian approach to whole-person medicine. This emphasizes the importance of including the spiritual dimension of man in health care problems and urges closer cooperation between health care professionals and Christian ministers. Some of the difficulties inherent in this approach are highlighted in this paper and some proposals for further progress outlined.

Introduction

THREE years ago a joint working party was set up by the Council of the Royal College of General Practitioners and the Churches' Council for Health and Healing to explore ways in which they could work together in providing care for patients. Three representatives from the College, who are all Christians, met with three representatives from the Churches' Council for Health and Healing to produce a Christian perspective on whole-person medicine as it affects both the church and the medical profession today.

The report of this working party, *Whole-person medicine*, addresses important issues within both the church and the medical profession. The Christian church in Europe is facing a crisis, with Europe the only part of the world where the church is growing at a slower rate than the population. If the church is to play its part in society then it must interpret theology in a way which is seen to be relevant and so be able to demonstrate the power of Jesus to change people's lives.

Equally, society may be considered to be in a state of crisis where one set of foundational pre-suppositions, based on Jewish beliefs and the Christian gospel, is gradually being replaced by a mixture of beliefs based on humanism, scientific rationalism and mysticism. We still benefit from the fact that much of our morality is based on Judeo-Christian values, but this basis for our collective ethical behaviour can no longer be assumed to be widely accepted or applied.

Pre-suppositions of medicine

The pre-suppositions which determine the activities and ethics of medicine are based on a combination of historical tradition and the belief systems of present day society. Many patients are expressing dissatisfaction with the inability of high-technological medicine to deal with many of their life problems. While doctors continue to struggle for advances which help the physical state of patients, patients are increasingly turning to alternative practitioners. These practitioners often seek to provide help for the patient's problems in the emotional and spiritual areas, which many people perceive to play a greater part than the physical state in the overall health of patients.

The belief of the working party members is that a new era of cooperation is needed if full health is to be achieved by our patients. Doctors are best at helping the physical and psychological aspects of illness, but others are more able to help with the emotional and spiritual aspects of ill-health. Christians

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believe that prayer and faith in Jesus has the power to promote the 'natural' healing processes and at times to produce an unexplained change in the health of individuals, which for want of a better word we call miraculous.

Issues for debate

Many Christians are now praying and experiencing the power of God to change their attitudes and behaviour towards health. An open-minded investigation of the claims made for the effectiveness of prayer would be of value. To this end the working party's report has been circulated to all College faculties for comment. At the same time the Churches' Council for Health and Healing has circulated it among its member churches. There are a number of important issues to examine in this debate:

- In an approach to medical care of the whole person it may not be enough to consider only the physical, psychological and social aspects. These components can include emotional and volitional aspects of the person as well as his or her relationships. The whole-person approach may still be incomplete, however, if it excludes a consideration of the spiritual nature of man.

- In the team approach to health care over the last few decades the contribution of the patient's spiritual adviser in management decisions has been reduced. Some practices have good links with local church ministers. For these links to become more widespread and useful, perhaps more importance should be given to joint teaching sessions for theology and medical students at both undergraduate and vocational training levels.

- Many patients wish to have prayer for their problems and equally many doctors wish to include the power of God to heal in the range of help they can make available to their patients. While Christian doctors would wish to encourage both of these approaches there are major ethical considerations when the faith of the doctor or the patient are included in the healing process within the context of the provision of health care. We need to consider the potential dangers and difficulties of adopting these practices.

The time is now ripe to open up discussions about the role of man's spirit in health and illness. Each of us has a personal belief in this area which affects our concepts concerning causation of illness and our approach to its management. Whatever our religious beliefs we are obliged to examine honestly the place of these beliefs in our daily work as health care providers.

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Copies of *Whole-person medicine* have been distributed to all faculty secretaries. Further copies may be obtained from the Churches Council for Health and Healing, St Marylebone Church, Marylebone Road, London NW1 5LT.



The Royal College of General Practitioners ACCOMMODATION AND CATERING

Members of the College are welcome to stay at 14 and 15 Princes Gate; early booking is recommended. Bed and breakfast may be obtained. Bookings should be sent to Lindsey Demetriou, the Accommodation Secretary. Public rooms may be hired subject to availability. Please contact Elizabeth Monk, Secretary to the Establishments Officer, at the Royal College of General Practitioners, 14 Princes Gate, Hyde Park, London SW7 1PU. Telephone 01-581 3232.