

MEDICINE & Spirituality

Asking About Faith: *A Clinical Professor Instructs Medical Students*

By Rev. Ken Blank and Dr. John Campbell – Oklahoma Health Center Clinical Pastoral Education Institute, Inc. © 2005

When medical students in their second year at Yale University medical school enter a patient's room to do a personal history, including questions about the patient's spiritual life, they go in prepared. According to an article entitled **Med Students Learn Finesse in Asking About Faith** by **Julia C. Keller**, published in the **January, 2005**, issue of **Science and Theology News**, their professor, **Dr. Auguste Fortin**, has taught them what to do.

Dr. Fortin believes patients 'want health care providers to ask about' [spirituality issues] in their lives – but he also believes 'knowing how and what is appropriate to ask is a skill needing to be taught in the medical school curriculum'.

Dr. Fortin uses an interview method developed by **Dr. Robert Smith**, professor of medicine and psychiatry at **Michigan State University**: the **Integrated Patient-Centered, Doctor-Centered Interview**. In a **doctor-centered encounter** between doctor and patient, the physician typically interrupts the patient after only 18 seconds of speaking, not allowing the patient to complete his first thought. In a **patient-centered** encounter between doctor and patient, the patient is allowed to express him or herself first and actually list the issues they want to discuss with the physician. There are a number of benefits to the physician from this approach according to Dr. Smith. Some of these include cutting down on patients' return visits, giving patients more satisfaction with the process, increasing patient compliance with medical advice, diminished instances of "doctor shopping", fewer lawsuits against physicians, and better health outcomes. Dr. Smith says 'get to the reason a person comes to the hospital' – including the reasons beyond a particular disease or body ailment.

The medical students hear more: ask the questions from a **tone of respectful curiosity** and allow for the **patient to be willing to "take the question"**. Avoid coughing and stammering on potentially sensitive questions, such as about their sexuality, as it conveys the impression this is something embarrassing or shameful (on this issue, the article says 91% of people want the doctor to ask them about this). Enter the questioning with **open-ended questions** and don't feel the need to cover every question on the history form. But remember that each question is important and the medical student should consider asking the ones he or she really dreads to ask. Dr. Fortin encourages the medical student to **build empathy** with the patient through echoing a patient's words, sitting forward in the chair, and maintaining eye contact. The patient-centered interview is conducted in an open and non-judgmental way.

Specifically, to begin the spirituality history, Dr. Fortin advises using a question like **"Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual or religious kind of person at all?"**. Responses may range from *negative reactions*, in which case the medical student can move on to other questions important to keeping the patient healthy, or *positive reactions*, in which the patient asks the student to pray with them. If the latter case, Dr. Fortin advises to consult the chaplain for appropriate management, with the student serving as an important conduit for getting the support a patient needs for his spiritual health.

To let us know YOUR opinions on this topic: please send **responses to:**

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