

Pastoral care in hospitals: a literature review

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ABSTRACT

Aims and background. This literature review investigates the potential contribution of the pastoral care provided in hospitals by hospital chaplains, as part of an integrated view of patient care, particularly in institutions dealing with severe disease.

Methods and study design. A search was conducted in the Medline database covering the last 10 years.

Results. Ninety-eight articles were considered concerning the modern hospital chaplains' relationships and the principal procedures and practices associated with their roles, i.e., their relations with the scientific world, with other religious figures in the community, with other faiths and religious confessions, with other public health professionals and operators, with colleagues in professional associations and training activities, and with the hospital organization as a whole, as well as their patient assessment activities and the spiritual-religious support they provide, also for the patients' families.

Conclusions. Improvements are needed on several fronts to professionalize the pastoral care provided in hospitals and modernize the figure of the hospital chaplain. These improvements include better relations between modern chaplains and the hospital organization and scientific world; more focus on a scientific approach to their activities and on evaluating the efficacy of pastoral care activities; greater clarity in the definition of the goals, methods and procedures; the design of protocols and a stance on important ethical issues; respect for the various faiths, different cultures and both religious and nonreligious or secularized customs; greater involvement in the multidisciplinary patient care teams, of which the hospital chaplains are an integral part; stronger integration with public health operators and cooperation with the psychosocial professions; specific training on pastoral care and professional certification of chaplains; and the development of shared ethical codes for the profession.

Key words: spiritual care, chaplain, hospital chaplaincy, pastoral care, bio-psycho-socio-spiritual integration.

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