

SPIRITUAL CARE SERVICES OFFER A COMPASSIONATE PRESENCE TO PATIENTS AND FAMILIES OF ALL CULTURES AND FAITH TRADITIONS.

source of strength

In a small nook of a fifth floor patient room at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, Father John Sigler speaks softly to a young mother whose two-month-old baby has been diagnosed with meningitis. While the medical team monitors the infant's vital signs, the hospital chaplain caresses the baby's forehead and offers a healing blessing.

One floor above, Rev. Dan Hudson, dressed in a cheerful Hawaiian shirt and jeans, heads out to meet a teenager in the Rehabilitation Unit recovering from an automobile accident. This is their time to chat and play the teen's favorite card game, Uno.

At the same time, three chaplain interns wheel a cart filled with cookies and tea to the oncology unit. A young patient has recently lost his battle with leukemia, and the Spiritual Care team has come to offer "Tea for the Soul" for the nurses and staff.

Spiritual Care Services is an integral component of Childrens Hospital's interdisciplinary, family-centered care. "Spiritual care helps to tie the whole family together. It's not about religion — it's about helping each person find his or her own source of strength," says Mary Dee

Hacker, RN, MBA, vice president of Patient Care Services, and chief nursing officer.

With a staff of four full-time religious professionals, two part-time chaplains and a growing cadre of chaplain interns, the presence of Spiritual Care Services is felt throughout the hospital. Their mission: to serve as a compassionate ear for patients and families of all cultures and faith traditions, providing comfort and understanding in a time of need.

"I meet a lot of teenagers who look into your eyes and ask, 'Why is this happening to me?'" explains Rev. Hudson. "I don't have the answers, but I can talk with them and make a connection so they know they're not alone."

The staff performs blessings and baptisms, counsels on end-of-life issues and maintains an Interfaith Meditation Room/Chapel in the George C. Page Building, offering bilingual Roman Catholic Mass on Sundays and year-round memorial and interfaith services. (In the future, as work on the New Hospital Building progresses, the chapel will move to a larger space near the Joyce and Stanley Black and Family Healing and Meditation Garden.)

Childrens Hospital helps to train new spiritual caregivers as an accredited training site of the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education. Theology students and clergy from all faiths, including seminarians, pastors, rabbis, priests and imams, come together for the dynamic internship program.

"The students develop great skills by working with families in a crisis situation and help our staff meet the growing demand for our services," says Rev. Dagmar Grefe, manager, Spiritual Care Services, and a certified Clinical Pastoral Education supervisor.

Spiritual Care Services recently received a tremendous boost in support, thanks to the Spiritual Care Guild, one of the Associate and Affiliate groups of volunteers who support the hospital. Since forming in June 2004, Guild members have organized special events to raise funds for the program's services and expansion. They also enlisted the help of local school children to knit dozens of baptismal stoles.

"It's amazing to see the connection the families have with the chaplains," says Heidi Johnson, founding Guild president. "When you're vulnerable and scared, it's comforting to have someone by your side for quiet, compassionate reflection."

The multi-cultural makeup of the hospital's patients and staff provides opportunities to appreciate diversity. For Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, Rev. Grefe arranged with the hospital cafeteria to provide traditional apples and honey. For Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, the cafeteria offered dates at sundown. "We want to nurture everyone's individual beliefs," says Rev. Grefe.



Reaching out to patients' family members is part of the job for Rev. Dagmar Grefe, left, and other chaplains.

The presence of spiritual discovery, courage and hope is palpable in the hospital. Father Sigler recalls a Muslim father who was initially puzzled to see the Roman Catholic priest talking to him about his daughter and her chronic illness. "Soon he started welcoming me back on each visit," says Father Sigler. "We listened and learned from one another." •

To support the work of Spiritual Care Services, please contact Marie Cantor, associate director of Foundation Giving, at 323-671-1777 or mcantor@chla.usc.edu.



As work on the New Hospital Building proceeds, the Interfaith Chapel/Meditation Room will inherit more spacious quarters in the existing hospital.

by elena epstein