

Spiritual Skills

'Spiritual Skills for Health Care Workers' - the title of the leaflet lying on the nurse's desk caught my eye. A free one-day seminar promised 'to explore the practical application of spiritual skills in a working environment'. Opening the leaflet I learnt that 'spiritual skills...are concerned with our deepest thoughts and feelings'. Furthermore I read that 'successful practitioners, consciously or otherwise, use their own spiritual skills to encourage and sustain a positive attitude in interactions with their patients'.

It all sounded quite laudable but a little reading between the lines, and a visit to the organiser's website, soon confirmed my suspicions that this was, of course, a New Age sham. This was not the brave initiative of the local CMF group but a seminar that would offer a mish-mash of quasi-Hindu philosophy, based on such underlying ideas as the essential goodness of all people, reincarnation, meditation and yoga. How disappointing that such an interesting concept should be hijacked, and even more disappointing that the local Postgraduate Medical Centre should allow its facilities to be used to add credence to the event.

Any recognition of the spiritual aspect of our nature by health care workers is certainly welcome. In the moments of ultimate need that serious illness may bring we realise instinctively, both as patients and carers, that there has to be more to life than the bleak finality of the here and now. Christians see this as evidence of a spiritual longing, for we are all made in God's image. The problem that confronts us as post-moderns is that a sensible acceptance of the limitations of conventional

medicine has opened the door to a myriad of 'feel good' therapies that masquerade as help for our 'spiritual' needs. In our practising lifetime many of us have seen the medical pendulum swing from the arrogant confidence of scientific rationalism to the surprising gullibility of much so-called complementary medicine. Neither, of course, has the answer to our true spiritual problems.

All would surely agree that Christian doctors in particular should hope to use 'spiritual skills' as they interact with patients who reveal their 'deepest thoughts and feelings'. The tragedy is that our proffered solution is often considered unacceptable in an age that maintains that truth is relative, and that there are numerous ways to God – and hence presumably to spiritual health.

Many patients seek help and support in the fears they have about their illnesses, and many doctors long for peace and contentment in the stress and uncertainty of their professional lives. When Jesus spoke to a group of his disciples with deeply troubled hearts he comforted them with the promise of a spiritual Counsellor. But the spiritual help offered, with its ultimate promise of future peace and freedom from all anxiety, can only be ours when we accept his astonishing claims. 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). There is increasing antagonism to any claim to certainty today, but we need more than ever to proclaim that there is a sure way to spiritual health that is open to all. Not just one of many ways but THE Way.

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