

Spirituality and health across the Atlantic

More than half of the medical schools in the United States now offer courses on 'spirituality and health', up from just three a decade ago, largely because patients are demanding 'more spiritual care'. According to a *Newsweek* Poll, 72 percent of Americans say they would welcome a conversation with their physician about faith; the same number say they believe that praying to God can cure someone, even if science says the person doesn't stand a chance. To make sense of the morass of data, the NIH commissioned a series of papers, published earlier this year, in which scientists attempted to definitively assess the state of the faith-and-health research. Lynda H. Powell, an epidemiologist at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago, reviewed about 150 papers, throwing out dozens that had flaws, those that failed to account for age and ethnicity, for example, which usually affect religiosity. In one respect, her findings were not surprising: while faith provides comfort in times of illness, it does not significantly slow cancer growth or improve recovery from acute illness. However people who regularly attend church have a 25 percent reduction in mortality compared with non-churchgoers. This is true even after controlling for variables intrinsically linked to Sundays in the pew, like social support and healthy lifestyle. (*Newsweek* 2005; 10 November, <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/3339654/>)

Scottish euthanasia move fails

MSP Jeremy Purvis has been campaigning for the legalisation of euthanasia in Scotland through a 'Dying with Dignity' Consultation. On 25 October 2005 he lodged a proposal for a bill 'to allow for a mentally capable, terminally ill adult the right to receive medical assistance to die'. Under the rules that regulate Members' Bills, a proposal of this kind had to attract 18 supporters within one month if it was to continue through the legislative process. However it attracted only five supporters within the allotted time period. This means that his proposed *Right to Die for the Terminally Ill Bill* will not proceed.

GP charged over late abortion

A GP from Birmingham has been charged with sending a woman to another country to have a late abortion. Dr Saroj Adlakha, 59, is accused of arranging the termination in Spain two years ago for Shilpa Abrol who was alleged to be 31 weeks pregnant. Miss Abrol, now 20, and Dr Adlakha were both charged on Wednesday night of conspiracy to commit an offence against a person outside the United Kingdom. (*BBC News* 2005; 15 December)

New parliamentary group promotes palliative care

An All-Party Parliamentary Group on Dying Well has been formed. Its purpose is educational - to address current misconceptions about end-of-life care, including the role, use and misuse of different drugs, the nature of euthanasia or assisted suicide, the present state of UK law in this matter, the ethical constraints within which doctors operate, and how these would be affected if the law were to be changed in the light of experience of countries which have gone down this road. It plans to produce briefing material and to hold open lectures by specialists in their fields. This will provide some opposition to the VES-sponsored All-Party Group on Compassion in Dying. Frank Field MP is Chairman.

Majority of UK doctors oppose euthanasia

The internet discussion forum www.doctors.net.uk (dnuk), to which over 110,000 UK doctors belong, has conducted an on-line poll on a variation of the September RCGP statement, 'With current advances in palliative care a change in the law to allow euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide is not necessary.' Of over 2,000 who responded (the largest response on record for dnuk) 69% voted in favour and 31% against. This is yet further confirmation that the majority of doctors on the frontline are opposed to a change in the law.

Christian doctor wins discrimination case

An eye specialist has accepted undisclosed damages after claiming that Muslim colleagues forced him out of his job. Joseph Erian took the United Lincolnshire Hospitals Trust to an employment tribunal, stating that he was made to resign from the ophthalmology department of Pilgrim Hospital, Boston, after staff there discovered that he was a Christian. The tribunal ended when the trust offered an out-of-court settlement and admitted that the problems surrounding Dr Erian's case 'were not his fault'. Dr Erian pursued his claim privately after the British Medical Association refused to back the case. He brought his case under the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003, which make it illegal to discriminate against someone on the grounds of their religion or beliefs. (*Times on Line* 2005; 30 November)

Stem cells for spinal cord injury

The director of the Spinal Repair Unit at University College, London, has announced trials of a new treatment for patients with spinal cord injuries. Ten patients will be treated at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery in London using stem cells taken from the lining of their noses. Professor Geoffrey Raisman warned that patients with spinal injuries should not get their hopes up but the trial raises the possibility that adult stem cell transplants could allow patients to recover sensation, movement and other functions in the future. (*The Telegraph* 2005; 30 November)

Alpha feeds spiritual hunger

The Alpha course, which teaches the basics of Christianity, has enjoyed a resurgence. The course originated in London's Holy Trinity Brompton more than 20 years ago and now, according to organisers, there are now some 30,000 Alpha courses running around the world. Sessions are held in prisons, workplaces, schools, colleges and military establishments. Around 7,000 UK churches are signed up, many running several courses a year, but the number of converts still does not match the tide of Christians leaving the church. (*BBC News* 2005; 4 August)

More women buy morning after pill

The number of women buying the morning-after pill from chemists has nearly doubled in a year. Over-the-counter purchases rose from 27% in 2003/04 to 50% in 2004/05, the Office for National Statistics found. Fewer women asked their GP for a prescription for the emergency contraceptive in the same time period. However, the percentage of women using it remained the same - about 7% of women aged 16-49 using the morning after pill every year. (*BBC News Online* 2005; 28 October)